

Water and Justice

Isaiah 35:1-7, 10

Preparation

Prepare a worship/reflection space with a bowl and/or pitcher of water, perhaps with some ornamental rocks or greenery scattered around or maybe a bundle of grapes or a small bunch of bananas. You may wish to include a print-out of this picture or another picture, sculpture, or object to remind the class of our brothers and sisters in Congo and the precious life-sustaining power of clean water.

Open with the following prayer or a prayer of your own choosing

O God

*who cleanses and rejuvenates
through the waters of baptism,
give us clean hearts
and energized minds
that we may hear the word
you are speaking to us today.
We join our hearts and minds
with those of our sisters and brothers
in Congo
and ask that you make us today
one,
one church
serving you,
the one God,
by serving your people and your earth.
Amen*



Read today's passage, using the translation provided below or a translation of your own choosing.

Isaiah 35:1-7, 10

The wilderness and the desert will exult.
The steppe will rejoice.
It will blossom like the crocus.
It will burst into bloom and rejoice!
Yes, it will rejoice and give a shout of joy!
It will be given the glory of Lebanon, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.
They will see the glory of Yahweh, the splendor of our God!

Strengthen feeble hands, fortify weak knees.

Say to those whose hearts are racing anxiously:

“Be strong! Don’t fear.

Look! Your God will come with vengeance and divine recompense.

God will come and rescue you.”

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened

and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.

Then those who can’t walk will leap like a deer.

Those who can’t speak will shout for joy.

Because waters will break out in the wilderness

and rivers in the desert.

The burning sand will become a pool and the thirsty ground, a spring of water.

In the place where jackals rest, there will be grass and reeds and papyrus.

... Yahweh’s ransomed ones will return.

They will enter Zion with a shout, eternal joy adorning their heads.

Joy and gladness will overwhelm them.

Sorrow and grief will flee.



A stream gushes out of a mountain cave in Lebanon.

Discuss the following questions:

What might the last verse be talking about? Who are “Yahweh’s ransomed ones”? To where are they returning? Any ideas about where they might have been?

In this passage, what’s the connection, if any, between the health and well-being of the human community and the health and well-being of the earth? Does that view strike you as right? Explain.

Do you think political and economic justice can have a positive ecological impact? Explain. Can you give some examples?

Can you think of examples where social and economic injustice has had negative consequences for the environment?

Can greed have an environmental impact? If so, can you name a few examples?

How, if at all, would you rephrase this oracle to speak specifically to our situation today?

Water and justice in Congo

The Congo River and its tributaries are the circulatory system of life in Congo. The river, more than 500 miles long between pools at the top and toward the end of its course, functions as the primary transportation route, the social-economic superhighway of central Africa. The river highway has been a mixed blessing. It's the route Henry Morton Stanley took to "open" central Africa to the imperial economic control of Belgium and the European powers. It was the transportation hub for the rubber trade that led to horrifying human rights abuses at the turn of the 20th Century. Its enormous hydro-electric potential has been harnessed to the benefit of international mining operations in the east, with virtually no benefit to the Congolese people for everyday necessities that could be met by cheap, accessible electric power. But it's also the avenue of commerce, the most important economic lifeline for the Congolese people.

Its waters nourish the lush rainforest, one of the last remaining large tropical rainforests on earth, the so-called "lungs" of the earth, because they are responsible for about 30% of the earth's oxygen turnover. The waters teem with fish and waterfowl, nourish an incredibly diverse variety of fruit trees, provide a pharmacological paradise of healing, life-sustaining medications, and give water for agriculture.

At the height of the civil war, various militias and government military forces seized and dismantled river boats for fuel and to melt down metal for bullets and weapons. As a result, transportation on the river has been seriously hampered, with considerable economic consequences. Dislocations and damaged infrastructure have degraded sanitation, health care, and education, and increased poverty. Deforestation is increasing as the poor cut trees for fuel and farming and to float down the river to sell as timber for far-away markets in Europe and China. This unhinges the delicate balance of production and absorption of carbon dioxide that occurs in major tropical rainforests, increasing the net yield of greenhouse gases, raising aggregate global temperatures, disrupting weather patterns and changing climate around the world. This is serious business, with long-term global consequences.



Transporting timber and other goods down the Congo River

Safe drinking water continues to be a critical issue in Congo as well as elsewhere in Africa, an issue that has a particular impact on women, who bear most of the responsibility for providing water for cooking and drinking. Global Ministries collaborates with a variety of international NGOs to fund well projects that bring clean drinking water to Congolese families (for more information and a link for contributions visit the Global Ministries [website](#)).

Through its educational ministries, economic development projects and its commitment to women and children's health care and empowerment, the Disciples community in Congo promotes safe, healthy preparation of food and water, as well as sustainable agricultural practices that preserve water quality and the health of the forest. In fact, one of the rituals associated with Christian hospitality in Congo is the washing of hands with soap and water in a basin placed before the dining table. By liturgical act, the church promotes healthy, sanitary consumption of food.

Discuss the following question

What are some ways I as an individual and we as a congregation can help support a modern-day fulfillment of the prophetic vision of Isaiah 35 with our sisters and brothers in Congo?

Commentary on Isaiah 35: rivers in the desert

Today's passage comes from a chapter in the book of Isaiah that scholars normally attribute to an anonymous disciple of the prophet Isaiah who lived about a hundred and fifty years after Isaiah.

For a long time now, scholars have noticed that the material in the book of Isaiah takes a dramatic shift in chapter 40. At the end of chapter 39, the prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz, a priest and prophet in the royal court in Jerusalem, is alive and well and living in Jerusalem during the time that King Hezekiah was engaged in a rebellion against the Assyrian empire, around 700 BCE. Hezekiah has just entertained ambassadors from a Babylonian king who was at war with Assyria in the east. Hezekiah, who, we know from Assyrian records, was the ring-leader of a rebel alliance in the west, apparently wanted to join forces with Babylon.



The chapter ends with Isaiah predicting that someday, the Babylonians will loot the royal palace in Jerusalem and carry Hezekiah's descendants into exile in Babylonia (39:5-7). Of course, that's just what happened in 586 BCE. The Babylonians looted and destroyed Jerusalem, including the palace and temple, and deported a large number of royal courtiers to Babylonia, beginning the period of Babylonian exile.

Chapter 40 makes a sudden shift: "‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Declare to it that its war is finished. For its guilt has been paid off. For it has taken double for all its sins’" (v 1). We now seem to have shifted to a time when Jerusalem has suffered a devastating military defeat. In other words, it sounds a lot like post-586 Jerusalem. Furthermore, it sounds like chapter 40 is taking place on the far side of a desert: "‘A voice is calling out: ‘In the wilderness, clear out the road of Yahweh! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!’" (v 2). The oracles that follow speak of a return across the desert to Zion, the hill in Jerusalem where the temple stood. In other words, they seem to be addressing people in exile in the heartland of Babylonia. So we

apparently shifted location and time when we moved from chapter 39 to chapter 40. The time-shift is more precisely delineated in chapter 45, when the still anonymous prophet makes this amazing statement: “Thus says Yahweh to his messiah, to Cyrus whose right hand I have taken hold of to subdue nations before him...” (v 1). Cyrus is the Persian emperor who conquered Babylon in 539 BCE and a year later, according to the Bible, issued a decree that Judeans living in exile in Babylonia could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple with Persian imperial money. So the setting of this oracle is Babylonia around 538 BCE, a little more than a hundred fifty years after Isaiah ben Amoz spoke to Hezekiah in chapter 39. It’s no



The Congo River is the primary transportation artery, a “superhighway” through the heart of Africa.

accident that Isaiah disappears as a character in chapter 40 and never returns. The material in these chapters is from the hand of an anonymous disciple of Isaiah who lived a century and a half later in Babylonia. This disciple saw the hand of Yahweh in the actions of the Persians. He or she is heavily influenced by the themes and images in the prophecies of the eighth century prophet Isaiah and is now bringing those themes and images forward to a new time and a new situation. God, it appears, is still speaking.

The content and apparent location shifts again in chapter 56. We’re now back in Jerusalem and in the process of rebuilding the Jerusalem temple and/or reestablishing worship there. This continues till the end of the book in chapter 66. Though Cyrus issued his decree in 538 BCE, it wasn’t until 520 that work actually began on rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. It was completed in 515. So it’s around this time that chapters 56-66 were written. Whether the author is the same as the author of chapters 40-55 or not, who knows? But these major shifts in location, timeframe, and content as the book of Isaiah progresses has led biblical scholars to surmise that we have 3 major sections of Isaiah: chapters 1-39, which scholars call “First Isaiah,” chapters 40-55, called “Second Isaiah,” and chapters 56-66, “Third Isaiah.”

That’s the broad picture, but it’s a little more nuanced than that. It’s pretty clear that chapters 1-39 have been arranged and supplemented in such a way as to lead us toward Babylonian exile -- see, for example, the climactic oracle of Isaiah at the end of 39. So it’s likely that the shape those chapters took are from the same hand as the person who gave us the material from the time of Cyrus. So the author behind “Second Isaiah” gave the oracles and narratives in “First Isaiah” their definitive shape. Then someone now in Jerusalem added chapters 56-66 (“Third Isaiah”) sometime during or shortly after the rebuilding of the temple, around 520-515 BCE. This final author-editor did a few touch-ups here and there to the earlier work done by the author of “Second Isaiah.” So within the earliest material in chapters 1-39, we would expect to find evidence of tinkering by the person who gave us “Second Isaiah” and the person who gave us “Third Isaiah.”

That's exactly what we have in today's passage. This chapter uses themes and images that are distinctively characteristic of the oracles in Second Isaiah, especially the theme introduced in chapter 40 of a highway in the desert. A trip from Babylon to Jerusalem in ancient times was not a straight shot because a vast desert sits between them. Travelers headed northwest through the irrigated land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. They crossed the Euphrates in what today is southwest Turkey and headed south southwest toward the rain-nourished hill country along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. This long route offered the best chance of finding sufficient food and water. Second Isaiah envisions a liberation of the Babylonian exiles and a return to Jerusalem that will be so swift and dramatic that there won't even be time to take the normal route. Yahweh will carry the exiles back to Jerusalem so fast that it will be necessary to build a superhighway in the desert. They will speed through the arid wilderness at 100 miles an hour on a flat, straight four-lane highway with a police escort! "Every valley will be lifted up and every mountain and hill will be laid low. The steep ground will be leveled and the rough places will become a plain. And the glory of Yahweh will be revealed, and all flesh will see his glory!" (40:4). The liberation of the exiles will be fast and spectacular.

Today's passage is placed before the dramatic rescue envisioned in chapters 40-55, so, in the current structure of the book, it serves to foreshadow the return from exile. It's also placed immediately before the final segment of "First Isaiah," a four-chapter narrative (chapters 36-39) that is lifted almost verbatim from 2 Kings (18:13 -- 20:19). Were it not for the material borrowed from 2 Kings, this would be the final oracle before the "Second Isaiah" oracles begin in chapter 40.

Our passage describes the highway through the desert, the path of liberation that lies before the people in exile.

When God rescues the exiles, the oracle says, the desert will bloom. Dry places will become pools of water. Desert plains will be filled with swamp-reeds and papyrus. Parched earth will burst forth with springs of water. Hot sands will become lush oases, verdant forests, as in the mountains of Lebanon, the hill country along the Mediterranean.

The miraculous rejuvenation of the scorched earth will coincide with the rejuvenation of the fractured and bruised human community, weakened by years of warfare and deprivation. God's spectacular rescue will strengthen those who literally or metaphorically have feeble hands and weak knees, whose hearts race with anxiety (vv 3-4). The blind and deaf -- perhaps referring to those who have been imprisoned -- will again see the light of day and hear the sounds of everyday life (v 5). Those who can't travel freely will leap free like a deer. Those who are silenced will shout for joy (v 6), because "God will come and rescue you" (v 4). All of this will happen as "waters break out in the wilderness and rivers in the desert!" (v 6).



Agricultural terraces in the mountains of Lebanon

This striking imagery makes clever allusion to a couple of core narratives from the exodus and promised land traditions. In Exodus 14 and 15, as Israel flees the Egyptian army, it finds its route to freedom blocked by the sea. Unfortunately, the ancient Greek translation, the Septuagint, misreads the Hebrew term *yam suph* in Exodus 15, translating it as “Red Sea.” A cursory glance at a map shows that it makes no sense for the Israelites to flee toward the Red Sea to get out of Egypt and into Canaan. The Hebrew text doesn’t name the sea until 15:4 and again in 15:22, where it calls it *yam suph*, “the Reed Sea.” The “sea” is either a reed-permeated inlet of the Mediterranean or one of the marshy swamps in the area now cut by the Suez Canal. The narratives and poems of Exodus 14 and 15 combine a variety of slightly different versions of that key event in Israel’s narrative of liberation. But the broad outline is this: the imperial army drowns in the sea, while the Israelites flee to safety on dry land. This is accomplished by the power and to the glory of Yahweh.

This theme is repeated in modified form in Joshua 3 when the Israelites cross the Jordan River into the land of Canaan. The priests lead the people to the water’s edge, carrying the ark of the covenant. As soon as their feet touch the river -- which was in flood stage at the time -- the water stopped flowing, the water piling up in the distance upstream. The priests stand in the middle of the river bed while the whole nation crosses on dry land (vv 14-17).

Isaiah 35 draws from these key narratives and flips them upside down to describe the new situation faced by the exiles. In the past, Yahweh rescued Hebrew slaves from the grip of Egyptian imperialism bringing them across the waters on dry land. Now Yahweh rescues Judah’s exiles from the grip of the Babylonian empire by creating rivers in the desert, reed-permeated pools of water in the wilderness, oases of water and food for their journey back home. Though in a different time under different circumstances, their liberation is like the foundational event that cemented Israel’s relationship with Yahweh, the liberation and exodus from Egypt. The fall of Babylon and the exiles’ release is Yahweh’s new exodus, Israel’s new crossing the River Jordan. “Yahweh’s ransomed ones will return! They’ll enter Zion with shouts of joy, eternal joy on their heads! Joy and gladness will overwhelm them. Sorrow and grief will flee” (Isa 35:10).

In this vision of the future, the political and spiritual liberation of the people goes hand-in-hand with the rejuvenation and flourishing of the natural world. In a very literal sense, the bone-dry wilderness and burning sands of the land that lies between the exiles and their ancestral home in Jerusalem is an insurmountable barrier to their political and spiritual liberation. The drought-baked earth stands as a death-zone between them and freedom. But in the prophetic imagination of the oracle, this insurmountable natural barrier, by the transforming power of God, becomes a path of escape -- a redeemed, reclaimed earth for a redeemed and rescued people. By God’s regenerative power, the dry, cracked ground springs to life with pools and rivers of water. Grasses and forests teem with life. Lavish



abundance replaces the harsh scarcity of parched plains. A rejuvenated earth is both the metaphorical and the literal path to political and spiritual liberation for the people. In the new world God envisions, human life flourishes as the earth flourishes. Political and economic justice is fulfilled in the context of a healthy, rejuvenated natural world made healthy and whole by the loving power of God.

Close with the following prayer or a prayer of your own choosing

*Holy fountain of justice,
fill us to overflowing
with passion
for your mission
of justice in the world,
of ecological wholeness,
of peace.
Help us hear your call.
Give us the courage
to respond
with our lives,
given for the cause
of justice and peace.
Help us live and speak
for a just economy,
a gentle human footprint
on the natural world that sustains us
and brings us daily blessings.
Make us humble.
Give us courage.
In the name of the one
who humbled himself
to the point of death on a cross,
in the name of Jesus,
the seemingly insignificant,
but supremely significant
Nazarene,
Amen.*

For the complete bible study series please visit
www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html.