

Old Testament Lesson—Isaiah 41:1-10 (Kathy Ott)

*Listen to me in silence, O coastlands; let the peoples renew their strength; let them approach, then let them speak; let us together draw near for judgment. Who has roused a victor from the east, summoned him to his service? He delivers up nations to him, and tramples kings under foot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. He pursues them and passes on safely, scarcely touching the path with his feet. Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, am first, and will be with the last. The coastlands have seen and are afraid, the ends of the earth tremble; they have drawn near and come. Each one helps the other, saying to one another, "Take courage!" The artisan encourages the goldsmith, and the one who smooths with the hammer encourages the one who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering, "It is good"; and they fasten it with nails so that it cannot be moved. But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off"; **do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.***

New Testament Lesson—Romans 8:31-39 (Julie Book)

*What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

Self-awareness is pretty much always a good thing. Wouldn't you say?

And one thing I know about myself is that I tend to be a bit too trusting. My first instinct isn't to doubt the veracity or intentions behind what someone is saying.

Instead, I usually give others the benefit of the doubt. I typically don't question their motives or character. I don't suspect anything nefarious or for them to be talking out of both sides of their mouth.

I suppose it's just my natural way of being. But, if I really stop to think about it, perhaps I'm this way because it's how I want others to treat me. I want to be trusted. I don't want my neighbors suspecting ulterior motives *from me* or doubting the truth of *my* words.

And so, you know, I tend to accept what others are saying to me...sometimes at face-value—for better or for worse.

For the most part, my M.O. serves me well in forming and cultivating relationships, though I'll sometimes miss when others are laying on the sarcasm. And you know what? That's just fine.

But, I'll be honest: the past five years or so has challenged my natural demeanor. Instead, I've noticed I'm doing more questioning. I'm more doubtful, more suspicious of my neighbors—especially of those with whom I may be more inclined to disagree.

Over time it seems, my mantra feels more and more like, “trust but verify”—which isn't really trust at all if you ask me.

And I don't like this emerging side of myself—this part of me that doubts the intentions and motives of others. And yet, alas, it feels necessary at times in today's socio-political climate.

From the perspective of faith, being overly trusting has been good for me—especially during those times when life doesn't seem to be going my way or becomes way too unpredictable. It's in those moments where my inclination to trust comes in handy—putting my faith in the shepherd who leads me over every hill and through every valley.

We (of course) continue our sermon series this week on our church's favorite passages from scripture as shared by our currently serving elders and deacons. Thanks again to Kathy Ott and Julie Book for offering these two.

In a sense, both texts this morning are about God's absolute refusal to let anything get in the way of our Lord's saving grace and protection.

Both Isaiah's prophecy and Paul's words to Rome make the case that nothing stands a chance—not even a mega millions lottery-style chance of staving off God's steadfast love.

But you see—Here's the difference between yours truly and the great prophet Isaiah (there are many I know). And for that matter, here's the difference between me and the Apostle Paul...

I am quick to trust and (because of that), I'm more easily convinced when someone is trying to make a point. I'm not a pushover per se, but my trusting nature tends to make me more receptive to an argument being made. I wouldn't say I'm gullible (necessarily), but I'm likely to hear truth rather than a joke.

Playing the skeptic just isn't my default programming, you know. And I'm not trying to suggest that being naturally skeptical or naturally trusting is better than the other.

I'm laying all of this out to show you that neither Isaiah nor Paul were people that were easy to convince. They both asked questions. They didn't take things at face-value.

Both were superb scholars of scripture—literary geniuses in their own right and faithful followers of the God of Israel—both passionate about spreading the good news of God's love to all peoples and to the ends of the earth.

But neither of them would've been likely to let you pull a fast one on them—too sharp for that. Neither would've accepted any sort of argument or case being made without thoroughly and exhaustively examining it first—doing so (I'm sure) from every conceivable point of view.

We might imagine Isaiah pondering the great truths of his day in the company of kings and visiting royalty and emissaries from surrounding nations—quick, perhaps, to remind both his countrymen and all within earshot of God's coming justice.

Likewise, we can picture Paul debating theology and other important questions of his time among the wisest thinkers in the Mediterranean world—a philosopher in his own right exchanging rebuttals and counterpoints in the marketplace of ancient Athens.

And here's what's crucial: Both of these brilliant minds approached the truth about God and questions about scripture with a greater scrutiny than anything else one might possibly think about or consider.

Sure, Paul may have been seen debating with others in public and sweating a bit over hypothetical questions like whether or not a tree makes a sound while falling if no one's around. But those kind of questions don't require the passions of our heart—just a little perspiration.

But the *big* questions—questions about the Lord of all Creation, about sin and forgiveness, our purpose in life, about mercy and justice—yes, those questions required Paul and Isaiah's blood, sweat, and tears.

In other words, if you were trying to argue something about the nature of the Divine or about how the written word of God should be understood, both Isaiah and Paul would've left no stone unturned. Any case made about such things would've been poured over with a microscopically fine-toothed comb before any answer was given or interpretation offered.

No, they were *not* easily convinced—especially when it came to matters about God and God's Law. After all, the heaviest, most consequential questions deserve the closest and most precise examination.

Let's take a look at Isaiah first. Here was a prophet's prophet—perhaps the greatest and most well known in all of Israel's history—respected and influential.

He would've been seen regularly advising the kings of Israel in their royal courts—trying to faithfully steer the nation in a direction of God's choosing.

If the breadth of his career and length of his ministry is any indication, Isaiah was truly gifted—inspiring a host of others who wanted to take up his mantle—his counsel valued among many even though it wasn't always followed by those in power.

But, we have to remember: Isaiah wasn't easily convinced that being a prophet was what he was supposed to do. In fact, it took the Lord Almighty acting in some downright mighty ways to tip Isaiah toward that path. It took something marvelous—something impossible to ignore—something miraculous and indisputable to convince him this was it.

You see, Isaiah thought himself to be unworthy of serving God. He thought he was too sinful—too stained and blemished by his mistakes. He had uttered too many curses and spoken too harshly too many times.

“Perhaps another—someone with a cleaner record and purer heart could do a better job. You're calling me to do what, God? I'm just not sure I'm the right one to do this...”

It took the Lord plucking Isaiah out of his prison of doubt and giving him a showstopping vision in the Temple: God enthroned in the holy of holies, surrounded by six-winged angels—one of which purged his mouth of all sin with a burning coal from the altar—it took all *that* to convince Isaiah he was the one God wanted—the one God had equipped to serve and prophesy.

God saw his gifts and everything he was capable of before Isaiah could even entertain the thought of it. Not easily convinced, you see...

Of course Paul's another great example. Here was one of the most talented and prolific writers in the ancient world—a Pharisee, tentmaker, and (eventually) an apostle.

He was a world traveler and would've been seen planting and nourishing church communities, while also collecting offerings for the poor.

If the fact that his letters alone make up half the New Testament is any indication, Paul was uniquely gifted, phenomenal even—inspiring other writers and countless pastors who would follow his lead and wisdom to the present day.

But again, let's remember: Paul wasn't easily convinced that Jesus was the Messiah—much less that he should be worshipping Jesus and spreading his gospel. In fact, he was pretty sure the Jesus movement needed to be crushed.

You see, Paul *persecuted* the Church—seeking to capture and imprison those who were a part of it. It took nothing less than God's amazing grace to change his mind. It took something truly remarkable—something impossible to ignore—something miraculous and unavoidable to convince him Jesus was the One.

It took the risen Christ stopping Saul in his tracks, knocking him to the ground, right off his horse by the most brilliant light imaginable to get his attention.

It took Christ's own pleading voice for Paul to finally grasp the Truth—it took all that to convince him he was lost and needed to be found—to accept the wretch he had been, and that God wanted him still.

God saw who he could be after turning the page on his past: the Apostle to the Gentiles...the greatest church planter in history. God saw it—long before Paul ever had the vision to see it. In fact, Paul had to lose his vision to see it. Not easily convinced, you see...

I hope you realize the extremely high evidentiary bar held by these two saints.

Because if we're able to grasp just how unreasonably high that bar was, it helps make what they *are* sure of even more meaningful and all the more significant.

When they say they *believe* something—that they *know* something—we can rest assured they've done their homework. We can assume a mountain of undeniable holy proofs behind their words—given directly from the throne of grace in bold, miraculous fashion.

My friends: Both lessons this morning show us the things about which Paul and Isaiah are totally convinced—offering the good news they know with ironclad certainty...

And that good news—the good news of the gospel is that we are inseparable from God's love and comforting presence and protection.

The good news is that you need *not fear, for [God is] with you, do not be afraid, for [the Lord is] your God; [who] will strengthen you, will help you, [and] will uphold you with [God's] victorious right hand.*

The good news is that (to his surprise, perhaps) Paul is convinced *that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

If you're like me, then perhaps you don't need as much convincing. But if you're stubborn and skeptical like these two, then this message is for you. These words from scripture are for you.

They're, of course, for everyone—but especially for those who need just a bit more to push them over that pesky hump of doubt.

Regardless of where you find yourself along the journey of faith, there is a place for you in the Body of Christ. Jesus welcomes your doubts and questions and theological rebuttals. Jesus even embraces that part of you deep down inside that just can't get there.

Whether easily agreeable or skeptical to the end, God is chasing after you.

Of that, I'm absolutely convinced.

Amen.