

Isaiah and Freedom

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[0 : 0 0] Hi everyone, my name is Angela. I am so excited to be with you today if we don't know each other. I am one of the pastors here at the table and I'm really excited to be with you on this third week of Advent. But before we get started, I would like you all to indulge me in just one little exercise.

And don't worry, not a real exercise. I would never do that to you. I would like you to think about why you show up here every Sunday. Why do you return to this screen every Sunday at this time? I imagine when we met in person, there were many other reasons to come to church that had nothing to do with church or faith or God. We had really good snacks. It was a really great place to meet your friends should you want to get other snacks after service. It was also a really great place to hang out with your friends. Free child care. Perhaps you were looking for dates. I see you, Tim Cody. Good work. But all of those reasons are washed away now. It's just you, me, and the screen. And I know no one wants any more screen time this year. So why do you return? I can tell you why I return. I return because this hour and 15, hour and a half a week gives me the ability to reimagine with you all what life could be like. Should we actually be following the gospel as we wake up every morning? Should that actually be our frontline news instead of what is trending on CNN or Twitter in this insane year? The idea that we could go back to these scriptures and reimagine with the people of God as to what God is doing in their lives and what perhaps he wants to do in ours.

And the people we're going to talk about today did just that. They needed a lot of imagination in their life. They needed to reimagine what life could look like because they are fresh out of captivity from the Babylonian people, from the empire. They are fresh out of that. God has just pulled them out. And through the Spirit, through the prophet Isaiah, is trying to instill in them what life is going to look like under this new covenant with God, this re-instilled promise with the Lord.

And so I'm going to read Isaiah 61 in full for everyone now. And I encourage you to actually not read it with me. I encourage you to close your eyes and absorb it as if you were hearing this after a devastating time in your life, after a time when you were physically and emotionally and spiritually away from the Lord, what it would be like to be pulled back into that family. And the NIV entitles this section, The Year of the Lord's Favor, Isaiah 61.

[2 : 3 3] The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from the darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance for our God, to comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated.

They will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. Strangers will shepherd your flocks, foreigners will work your fields and vineyards, and you will be called priests of the Lord. You will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations and their riches you will boast. Instead of your shame, you will receive a double portion. And instead of disgrace, you will rejoice in your inheritance. And so you will inherit a double portion in your land, and an everlasting joy will be yours. For I, the Lord, love justice. I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness, I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed.

I delight greatly in the Lord for my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with the garment of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness. As a bridegroom adorns his head like a

priest and as a bride adorns herself with jewels. For as the soul makes the sprout come and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. Imagine hearing that. Imagine the joy, the elation hearing that after a time of emotional, physical, and spiritual captivity. Imagine that. Imagine the Spirit of the Lord coming through Isaiah and saying that he has been sent to bind up the brokenhearted. That goes so far beyond just comforting. That is somebody coming to your house not just with food, but with bandages and stitches.

To get in and do the dirty work with you so that you are actually healed and not just hugged. That was deep healing. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. That was an indication of the year of Jubilee. It was set in Levitical times of this idea that every 15 years every debt is washed away and every piece of land that was stolen goes back to its rightful owner. That is one Levitical practice that we could probably use today. A few of the other ones I wouldn't take into 2021, but that one I would. [5 : 24] Bestowing on them of crown of beauty instead of ashes. They were so used to mourning. Ashes were a daily ritual. They were so used to just sickness and darkness. A crown of beauty would replace ashes. Oil of joy. Oil was an anointing. It was put on people for celebrations, for blessings. This idea that they would also have oil put over their bodies to be anointed was huge. The garment of praise. People put on colorful clothing when it was celebration time.

That's what they were told that they would be covered in. The garment of praise. It also talks about the day of vengeance from our God. And that's something that is essentially the second coming of Christ. We don't have to talk about that today though. We got so many other things to worry about. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated.

Even the things that they saw with their eyes that looked like they could never ever be rebuilt. God says, go back to that place. You rebuild where we started. There is still hope there.

Don't despair. Don't despair. Rebuild. They will be called oaks of righteousness. A planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.

That tree imagery is important because it's not just that they would be called righteous. That they would be righteous people. But they would be oaks of righteousness. This very strong, powerful tree that can withstand the storm of whatever life is about to throw at them.

[6 : 51] And we know their story. Life throws at them a lot of trouble. They also get themselves into a lot of trouble too. But life throws them into a lot of trouble. But a tree is rooted. It grows slowly.

It grows deep. And so when a storm comes, it still stands. That's the righteousness that God was putting on them. Something that could withstand whatever the world was about to throw at it.

And so the people who heard this, God, I wish I could go through all this. I can't. We don't have time. We don't have time, people. Goodness. It's too long. But it's amazing. So you should read it too. But the people who heard this knew that this meant a new covenant. Knew that this meant joy. Knew that this meant new promises. They reimagined life with God again. That's what happened here.

They were able to do that. God promised that to them. But what happens when we stop reimagining life with God? When we stop having the ability or practicing that? When we stop using that muscle to reimagine?

We stop listening to the Holy Spirit speaking through the people God has anointed. If we lose our ability to imagine with God as we read and look at God's word, we lose our direction in these passages. We just do. That's what happens. Because what happens is our minds then craft a new message as to what we want to hear, what fits our agenda, where we want our life to go, instead of what God has in store for us, instead of where God's people are supposed to move next.

[8 : 33] We decide then. We become our own gods. We say thanks. Thanks for the moral lessons. We'll take it from here.

That's what happens when we fail to reimagine. And we do this every day. We can read the same exact words as somebody else and have a completely different interpretation within scripture.

It happens all the time. Whenever I think about this concept, I think about how haunting it is to read President Lincoln's second inaugural address, specifically the piece that says, both read the same Bible and prayed to the same God and each invokes his aid against the other.

If you wanted to use scripture to justify slavery, your ability to enslave other humans, you could do that. We could still do that today. But scripture doesn't exist for us to justify our actions. It doesn't. It exists to direct our actions, to show us where to go next, because we are not in charge. We are not leading here. We are being led. We are following.

At face value, something like slavery, you know, existed. But because these are reports of a broken world within scripture, they prevailed, right? It wasn't God's intention for slavery to prevail throughout scripture. These were reports on a time, reports on what was actually happening. It's when you don't read the ark of scripture, when you don't understand where God was going, when you don't understand the pains he felt for his people who were going through this. That you could pick up a scripture and say, yeah, slavery is permitted. We should do that. That's God's will. We should never look to scripture to justify our actions. We should always look to scripture to direct our actions.

[10 : 33] What is God calling us to, despite all the brokenness we see around us? We can't even blame our short Twitter attention span that we currently have to this problem. We really can't. We've been trying to use scripture to fit our agendas our entire lives, the entire, and by lives I mean all of us, collectively, the entire history of humankind. We've been doing this.

It's been happening since these words were written. We're actually going to look at a perfect example of how that happened during Jesus's ministry. So the same words that I just read, the same exact words by the prophet Isaiah were read again by Jesus himself when he went back to Galilee after he spent an enormous amount of time, 40 days and 40 nights, in the desert with the devil. So he is, I mean, imagine after all that time away and then you have to spend time with the devil while you're trying to be by yourself. You leave that place, you are on fire. You are ready to go. I would be afraid to run into Jesus after that time. And he went straight to Galilee. He went straight to the synagogue. And we pick up that story in Luke chapter 4. And it is verse, that was Rosie coughing in the background. She's always near. Chapter 4, verse 16. And I'll read it for you all. Chapter 4, verse 16 says,

Jesus went to Nazareth where he had been brought up. And on the Sabbath day, he went into the synagogue. And as it was custom, so it was normal for people to do this, he stood up. And this is basically Jesus's introduction to his ministry, his sermoning, right? He'd been brought up on the Sabbath day, went to the synagogue as was custom. And he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.

The same thing we just read was handed to him. That's what Jesus read that day. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written. And he chose to say this. This is what he chose to use for his first words to us. His first words to the synagogue. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Free from captivity, all of you. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Essentially saying, it's me. I'm the one. I did the things. You're free now. That's what this is about. That's what my ministry is about. Your salvation. Your freedom. You are captives no longer. And you know what? People were pretty impressed. It says that they all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. Is this Joseph's son? They asked. The carpenter's son?

[13 : 36] Really? Amazed. Jesus, clearly seeing straight to their heart, says, surely you will quote this proverb to me. Physician, heal yourself. And you will tell me, do here in your hometown what we have heard you do in Capernaum. Truly I tell you, Jesus said, no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time. When the sky was about to shut for three and a half years, and there was severe famine throughout the land, yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha, the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed, only Naaman, the Syrian.

So, things changed. All of the people in the synagogue were furious after they heard this addition. After they heard what Jesus had to say. They got up and drove him out of the town and took to him the brow of the hill on which the town was built in order to, listen, throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. Oh my god, what swagger does Jesus have? He's just like, no thanks, I'm actually not going to be, oh, hello. I'm actually not going to be pushed off that cliff. I'm going to walk and I'm going to go to the next town because I've got stuff to do.

So, what changed? The people loved this message, right? It was the same message that was told to God's people in Isaiah chapter 61. The same start. Jesus didn't continue on after that because it started to talk about the day of vengeance. And the day of vengeance is his second coming and that wasn't for then. That wasn't what the people needed to hear at that moment. Just like, we don't need to hear that right now. We need to focus on what we're supposed to do now with God's freedom.

[15:33] But they got mad after they heard what he had to say. Because what he had to say was, during the time when there was great famine, when horrible things were happening to the Israelites, guess who was healed? The foreigners. Guess who God chose to intervene with?

The people who were Gentiles. The people who were not a part of God's chosen people. And the people in the synagogue were angered by this. Mind you, they had been waiting for at least 400 years, I think, for Jesus to come. And then the Messiah is in front of them saying, you hear these words and you hear yourself in them. You don't realize that this is your job to do. You hear yourself as someone who's going to get all of this goodness from me when really it is now your responsibility to partner with me in this. And guess what? Just like I arrived with people who were not cool or popular or famous, in a weird place, in the middle of nowhere, outside. And just like I arrived to my death, instead of on a throne, on a donkey, I'm going to continue to mess up what you think about this kingdom.

Until you get it. It was all great when they saw themselves as the ones who were going to be bound up. It wasn't so great when they realized not only are they instructed to do those same things, things. But also they don't always get the attention. It's not all about them. The gospel is not centered on them. Jesus didn't come back for just them. Came back for everyone. And oftentimes, the people who we forget are the ones we claim are the outsiders. The ones who aren't worthy. The foreigners.

They tried. They hated it so much, they tried to throw them off a cliff. The savior they've been waiting 400 years for, the second he forced them to look inward and look at what they're doing as they absorb scripture, as they're looking back at Isaiah, as they're looking back at what the Israelites went through and absorbing it selfishly for something that only belongs to them and not to the world.

Once they had to do that self-reflection, they wanted out. They wanted nothing to do with it. Because it was no longer easy. They were done. They didn't want to hear it because they didn't want to disrupt their lives. Unfortunately, the gospel is disruption. That's what it is.

[18:10] This world is broken. The gospel is here to disrupt it. This is what we do all the time. Self-righteous people like this one, self-righteous religious people like these, were the ones that Jesus had the hardest time with.

Because we think we know, but we have no idea. We think we have this figured out. We think we look at scripture and we read a passage and we say, yes, that's what God believes. And then we close the book.

We forget the intricacies of the story. We forget how he uses broken people to tell his love and his joy and his promises to us. We forget it because we're seeing it selfishly, only through our own eyes, only for our own selves.

If there was ever a year that my faith would be tested, it was 2020. And not because everything that happened in the outward world. It was because how self-professing Christians responded to it. And I don't have to get into any of that. I don't want to discuss, bring up all of the pain again because we all know what happened. We all know all the different ways we feel betrayed by our own Christian family members. And I think a good reminder for me this year was that their limitations on scripture, their limitations on their own relationship with the Lord doesn't impact me. And it should never impact my relationship with God.

[19:52] The good news is for everybody, even the ones who have the hardest time hearing it and refuse to share it. They still get it. But that doesn't mean that I have to mimic their faith. And so often, I am also this person. I am also the one in the synagogue. And I need to check myself.

I need to remind myself that there is no in or out in God's kingdom. All are welcome. Even if they annoy me. I need to remind myself that it's not about me.

Yes, God has set me free. Yes, I am no longer captive. Yes, I am free in Christ, who the sun sets free is free indeed. Yes. But I need to make sure that I am also helping others be free.

If the freedom stops with me, then why am I a part of it? The gospel is to be shared. The good news is for everyone. For those of us who have grown up in the church, our interpretations of scripture are often through this Luke lens. We're told that, you know, this is what we believe because we believe it. This is what your parents believe. This is what you believe. This is how we move forward in this belief. End of story.

And without digging deeper, without reimagining with God, without understanding who he is talking to, who he is talking about, what he wants to do with that. And that's caused a lot of hurt, personally, for me. And it's caused me to add shame and things that were never ever supposed to be a part of my story onto my heart. And that's unfortunate, and I know that I am not the only one.

[21 : 35] I guess what I want to share with you all today is that reimagining God's purpose for our lives, what God wants to do here, is for all of us. And it demands all of us to be a part of it.

We need to all be in. We need to all look at the good news. We need to all say that we are going to feed the hungry. We are going to sit with sinners. We are going to befriend the foreigner.

All of these things are God's heart. And when I forget, when 2020 pulls me away, when I get distracted by someone doing something, I come back to what am I mandated to do?

Who am I mandated to serve? And not out of pity, but out of justice. But again, people's limitations will always drive others away or put others in shame boxes or make others believe that scripture is not for them.

Seven years ago, I sat in a church office and I was told by a pastor that the patriarchal view of scripture was the right one. Because they had read a few few verses in the Bible that said that women should cover their heads and not speak and not be such disruptors. And so that meant that women should never preach the gospel and actually aren't allowed to and should they do it, it's a sin. Cherry picking is fun, isn't it?

[23 : 15] And although I didn't want to try another church again, because I at that point was kind of distraught, I realized I just convinced myself I wouldn't have a church. I promised God that I would go to the one place that I had yet to try.

I had yet to try. This church. This was the one I had yet to try.

I arrived at the table in October 2013. After hearing one person's inability to reimagine God past a verse, past one scripture, past one passage, and get to the heart of the story.

I arrived broken. I arrived as a woman who desperately needed to reimagine God. I was low. And in the good ways I needed to reimagine because I needed to realize that the gospel was preached by many people who looked like me throughout scripture, by many women.

I needed to be affirmed. I needed to be reminded of that. I needed to be reminded of that despite one person's perspective. But I also needed to reimagine in ways that were difficult for me, like how I had made evangelical culture an idol.

[24 : 34] I had to break that. I had to reimagine because my one perspective of scripture and of these stories and how it should be done and what is culture and what is tradition is not for everyone. It's just one. There's a much bigger story.

And I needed to learn that. This church, and I know I'm not alone in this, has been a healer, a comforter, an encourager, a challenger, and I am better for having stepped through these doors.

I should probably say stumbled through those doors seven years ago. I think because I was a part of this church during its initial phases in 2013, I've always felt this need to protect her.

And so when the opportunity for me to become a pastor happened, I jumped on it. I was ready to go and wanted to be a part of it, and I am so, so grateful that God gave me the courage to do so.

I, yeah, I still can't believe this is my life. And we've gone through some difficult seasons, of course, and I'm happy to be a part of the church during those times.

[25 : 40] I'm happy that God kept me where I was. But we're no longer there. We're in this season of harvest, of flourishing. And I'm no longer needed. And I don't say that in a way that disparages me at all.

I say that with confidence and excitement. When I first came to the table, I was the only woman who preached. It was me. And now we have so many. So many.

It's incredible. And I think it's just such a testament to who we are as a community. And now that we have Pastor Anthony, like, I trust him. He's someone I feel confident in leading our church.

We can trust this man. And so I no longer feel like I have to protect her. I feel like it's okay now for me to move on. And when I say move on, I really just mean move back.

I'm just taking some time to be a learner again. I'm just going to stay in the seats instead of getting up and hopefully at one point when we're back in person, standing on stage. A season where I can just absorb and reimagine.

[26 : 43] Maybe undo some things. I don't know. Whatever God wants to do. And I feel confident doing that not only because of our leadership, but because of the people who are springing up. This sermon is perfect timing.

We just had two weeks of the preaching cohort. All of those incredible voices that God has put in our community. It's just, it's amazing. I can't believe that this is where the table is now. I'm so, so proud. Again, not going anywhere. And I'll be here. I'll have more time to chat. You know, hang out.

More time to help. I may, when the doors open again, Jess and I will probably be greeters. So get ready for that. I just want to see where my faith goes next because we constantly have to reimagine.

That's it. That's what God wants us to always do with him. To look at scripture and dive deeper. And during this next season and for the rest of my life, there's really no way for me to ever capture what the meaning of my time here with all of you.

[27 : 46] The ways in which I've been able to share with all of you in this space, either from this viewpoint or from the stage. I'll never...

I'll never... I'll get there.

I'll never really understand. I don't think the impact this church in this time has had on my life and the opportunities this church has given me.

I hope my time sharing all of my mess ups, my... I blame 2020 for all of this.

My shortcomings, my regrets, my pains, my hopes, my joy. I hope me sharing all of that with this church over the past five years, six years actually, of me preaching has also helped someone else feel like they can share theirs.

[29 : 01] And the thing is, I'm just one story. We have so many other stories to learn about. We have so many other lives to learn about. And the ways in which God is moving in those lives.

So many other ways to reimagine what the good news means for people. I am forever grateful for my opportunity to share my walk with God with all of you.

Sometimes my stumble with God with all of you. And I'm excited to step aside so that more voices can be heard. So that more people can share.

So that our lives can continue to be enriched. It's just such a testament to who we are in our community. And I'm super impressed with every member of the cohort. But I'm extra impressed with all of the women.

I came to the table because I was told that women can't preach. And then I was handed a stage. And I have thought being in this community for so long, I've surrounded myself with people who also empower women.

[30 : 02] I forgot. Sometimes I forget that other people don't do that. But I was reminded this week that it is still a thing. My stepmother this week informed me that she does not believe in female preachers or pastors.

Yes, you heard that right. My stepmother. Which of course was very painful. And there's a lot to unpack there. But I think the reason I want to share that with you is because there's always going to be people in our lives who tell us that their limited view of Scripture should be ours.

That their interpretation of this holy book is the only one. It's not. It's not. Who the Son sets free is free indeed. This is our time, our ability, our lives here are to figure out what's next with God, where He's leading us.

And that's not based on someone's limited view of Scripture. That's based on where God wants us to be. That could defy anyone's limited perspective. And so I realized that this fight and this idea that women are just as worthy of men as sharing the pulpit is something that we will continue to go up against.

But that doesn't mean we should stop. We keep going. So although I am moving off stage, I will be a cheerleader right beside it.

[31 : 36] For everyone moving into the preaching cohort, but especially for the women. You belong on this stage. You belong in a place where you get to share how God has impacted your life.

You get to share interpretation of Scripture. You get to share the arc of the love story of God to us. You're worthy of doing that. We all are. So in closing, I won't cry anymore.

Promise. I just want to say thank you to everyone for being a part of a community that allows each and every one of us to look at this text and reimagine what life can be like with God at the helm.

And I pray for each and every one of us that we continue to do that not only for ourselves, but for everyone around us. For every single person we come in contact with. Because the good news is not good news if it's not for everyone.

Thank you. I love you all. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father God, we praise you and we thank you. I thank you for allowing me to share all the ways in which you have loved and tested and shown up and just filled my life with incredible purpose.

[33 : 02] I thank you for the ability to be in a community that appreciates every single story. I pray, Lord, that more communities get the opportunity to experience that.

I pray for encouragement over your people to not be afraid to reimagine what is in these words, in this text. Let us dive deep with you, Lord, during this time of Advent and beyond.

Let us take this hope and this joy of waiting and move it forward into a fruition of life with you. We love you so much. I thank you for everything.

In your name I pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.