

September 2021

Introduction to Isaiah and Micah

This month we reflect on the words of Isaiah and Micah about covenant fidelity, righteousness, a great feast, the joy of wine, and the birth of a child. We read, study, and pray with Scripture as a couple to encounter God, to allow Scripture to correct us and shape our worldview, and to see how our marriage and family fit into the true story of the world. We study Scripture, puzzle over it, and relish it.

We turn our attention to the southern kingdom of Judah not too long after the ministries of Amos and Hosea in Israel, the northern kingdom. The two small kingdoms of Judah and Israel were threatened with extinction by the Assyrian kings and their mighty, merciless army.

The warnings of Hosea and Amos went unheeded, and in 722 BC the Assyrian king Sennacherib and his violent, brutal army destroyed Israel and captured Samaria, its capital. He deported a vast majority of the 10 tribes that made up Israel and imported into Israel conquered peoples from other parts of his empire.

Israel had not heeded the prophets and the Assyrians had come, as predicted, and destroyed the northern kingdom. Her people had been deported, her cities ransacked, and Israel was never to be an independent nation again.

Assyria had not stopped with the northern kingdom. The king of Assyria's boast was to "cut off nations not a few" (Is 10:7). He went on to claim:

"I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones. ¹⁴ My hand has found, like a nest, the wealth of the peoples; and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened its mouth, or chirped." (Isaiah 10:13-14)

He was as good as his boast. He swept through Israel and into Judah. He destroyed all of the cities of Judah and had Jerusalem surrounded. We know from Assyrian records that Sennacherib boasted that he had Hezekiah, the king of Judah, "shut up like a bird in a cage." But God spared the king and Jerusalem, because the king finally came to his senses and trusted in the Lord (see 2 Kings 19).

As we have seen, the 8th century BC was a turbulent time in the Middle East. The expanding Assyrian Empire destroyed the kingdom of Israel and captured its capital city, Samaria, in 722. They rounded up the people, who had so often been unfaithful to the covenant with the Lord, and marched them off to exile in nearby lands. With that, the northern kingdom of Israel ceased to exist!

The southern kingdom of Judah barely avoided the Assyrian storm. King Ahaz refused to join the anti-Assyrian alliance with the northern kingdom; in fact, he gathered silver and gold from

the Temple of the Lord and sent it as tribute to the pagan Assyrian king. Judah thus became a vassal of the Assyrian empire . . . and safe for the moment.

Twenty years passed, and then Judah's King Hezekiah (son of Ahaz) boldly—and foolishly—joined Egypt and other local states in rebellion against the Assyrians. The prophet Isaiah warned him strenuously against this action. King Hezekiah did his best to prepare for the expected invasion. He strengthened the walls on the north and west sides of the city and secured the city's water supply by a secret tunnel that connected the city to a spring just outside the walls. He calculated that Jerusalem was now prepared to withstand a siege.

The Assyrian emperor, Sennacherib, responded quickly to his rebellious vassals and marched his armies into the region. They swept through Judah, brutally destroying every fortified city, and finally encircled Jerusalem. Sennacherib then sent his field commander to discuss Jerusalem's surrender. The commander positioned himself on a high place outside the city wall, just north of the Temple, and demanded they surrender (2 Kings 18:27–35).

The prophet Isaiah intervened and spoke to the king:

"Thus says the LORD: 'Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me. ⁷ I myself will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land; I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.'" (2 Kings 19:6–7)

The king found the courage to trust in the Lord. Shortly after that God acted and spared Jerusalem.

That very night the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. ³⁶ Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh. (2 Kings 19:35–36)

The northern kingdom had suffered under chaotic royal leadership, driven by murderous intrigue and unfaithfulness to the LORD and his covenant. Judah, by contrast, had faith that the Lord had established David's line and so enjoyed stability in leadership. But stability was no guarantee of quality. Judah had some excellent kings like Hezekiah, some mediocre kings, and some very bad kings. For a long while, it had avoided the worst apostasies of the northern kingdom; Baal worship had been rare. But by the end of the 8th century BC, the moral decay, social injustice, empty religiosity, and estrangement from God that had afflicted Israel had sprung up in Judah like weeds in a field. And it was to get much worse.

Kings, Prophets and Empire at a Glance

Southern Kingdom: Kings of Judah	Prophets	Northern Kingdom: Kings of Israel	Prophets	Major World Power
<p>Uzziah 783–742 BC</p> <p>Jotham 742–735 BC</p> <p>Ahaz 735–715 BC</p> <p>Hezekiah 715–687 BC</p>	<p><i>Isaiah</i> 742–670 BC</p> <p><i>Micah</i> 740–686 BC?</p>	<p>Jeroboam II 788–748 BC</p> <p>Zechariah (6 months)</p> <p>Shallum (one month)</p> <p>Menahem 748–737 BC</p> <p>Pekahiah 736–735 BC</p> <p>Pekah 734–731 BC</p> <p>Hoshea 730–722 BC</p> <p>Samaria destroyed 722 BC</p>	<p><i>Amos</i> 770–760 BC</p> <p><i>Hosea</i> 750–725 BC.</p>	<p>Assyrian Empire 745–627 BC</p> <p>Tiglath-Pileser 744–727 BC</p> <p>Syria and Israel against Judah in Syro-Ephramite War 735 BC (see Isaiah 7)</p> <p>Shalmaneser V 726–722 BC</p> <p>Sargon II 721–705 BC</p> <p>Sennacherib 705–701 Surrounded Jerusalem 701 BC</p>



Isaiah 5:1–7

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Isaiah 5:1–7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ² He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵ And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Meditation

The whole village is gathered to celebrate a bountiful grape harvest. The vats are full of grapes waiting to be processed into delicious wine. The joy that flows from the wine provides the perfect occasion for the prophet to sing this great love song about the beloved and his vineyard. Before long, you recognize the outlines of the familiar story of Israel. The Beloved is God and Judah is his vineyard. But the love song takes a strange, dark turn. It becomes a courtroom scene where they are being called upon to pass judgment between the owner of the vineyard (who has done everything possible to produce a good harvest) and his vineyard. When he came to taste the wine, he found that the grapes had gone wild. They were sour and unfit for wine. How are they to judge? Could they declare the people righteous? **No!** God looked for *mishpat*, (justice), but found *mishpach* (bloodshed); he looked for *tsadikah* (righteousness) but found *tsa'akah* (cries of distress). Devastating punishment followed.

This is a cautionary tale for us as well. His gifts to us are not for our sake alone. God expects a return on his investment. He expects good wine to come from our marriage. He expects justice and righteousness in the form of hospitality for the outcast, the weak, the orphan, and the widow. In short, we are to be like his Servant, for whom justice consists in not breaking a bruised reed, or quenching a dimly burning wick. (See Isaiah 42:3.)

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation.*

Share one idea with your spouse.

Prayers and Intentions: *As if you were talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord's Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

Blessing: *May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.*

Unity Prayer: *God, make our hearts one. Amen.*



Isaiah 7:11–16

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

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Reading: Isaiah 7:11–16

Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³ Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted."

Meditation

It is hard to read this passage and not think of Christmas. The familiarity of this passage evokes images of family gatherings, beautiful decorations, and festive meals. But the passage's familiarity can also dull us to the high drama and difficult choices that are demanded by faith. Set aside for a moment the Hallmark card images of Christmas. Now imagine you are faced with an impossibly difficult decision; wouldn't you like to know what God would have you do? Make the imagined choices exceedingly difficult, and make one of the options very scary—give up your job and move; turn down a terrific promotion which would have a negative impact on your family; be open to having another child, when finances are already tight. Now make the sign as big and clear as you would like, so that it would be unmistakably clear what God wanted. If the sign clearly pointed to the most difficult, costly option, would you be happy to receive it?

King Ahaz was faced with just such a difficult choice. For him it was literally life or death. Option 1: Choose to join an alliance against Assyria that would fail and result in Judah being destroyed by Assyria. Option 2: Refuse to join the insurrection against Assyria and instead call on that very enemy Assyria for help, and so run the risk of being assassinated by the leaders of the insurrection. But Isaiah offered Ahaz a third choice: Do nothing; have faith and trust that God would work it out. Ahaz was deathly afraid of option 3, God's option, too. To ease his considerable fear, the prophet invited Ahaz to ask for a sign, even an impossible one. This would be a way of trusting God even in his fear. And God's response—the pregnancy of a young woman—would prove his faithfulness. But the king rejected this incredible gift on the pretense that he refused to test God. Why? Because if he got the undeniable sign, he would have to do the very thing that frightened him. What would you do?

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Isaiah 9:1–7

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

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Reading: Isaiah 9:1–7

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. ³ You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴ For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶ For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Meditation

Again, because this reading so prominent in the Christmas season, it is hard not to hear Handel's *Messiah* in the back of our minds. In our reflection on marriage and family we need to hear this with fresh ears. A child is born—God is working through a human family. And this human family with this child who is the Messiah will multiply joy and shine light in the darkness. Joseph and Mary were filled with faith and welcomed, nourished, and cared for this child. Filled with gratitude, we, too, welcome the Christ child into our marriages, into our families. Our story fits into this scene. Our lives participate in bringing the light to a land of deep darkness.

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Lord's Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

Blessing: May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

Unity Prayer: God, make our hearts one. Amen.



Isaiah 11:1–10

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

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Reading: Isaiah 11:1–10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ² The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰ On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Meditation

The Spirit which hovered over creation and brought order out of chaos will come to rest on the child from the line of David. That Spirit will work in and through the child to restore order and make creation anew. That same Spirit hovers over us, over our marriages, to make us partners in signaling to the nations that a new age has begun—the age of the Messiah. The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord—the intimate language of marital love again.

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Micah 4:1–7

Pray

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-Lord, make haste to help us.

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Reading: Micah 4:1–7

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, ² and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ³ He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; ⁴ but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. ⁵ For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever. ⁶ In that day, says the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. ⁷ The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion now and forevermore.

Meditation

The historical setting for this oracle is war and destruction: the Assyrian destruction of the northern kingdom and the threat of the destruction of Judah. War and destruction are in the air. How incongruous it must have seemed to imagine the nations streaming to this relatively insignificant little hill in the highlands that ran down the spine of the Levant (the holy land). Not only will the nations, including Assyria, stream to this place, but they will also turn the weapons of war into farm implements to care for God's good creation. That day, which marks the renewal of creation, has begun with the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. We, in the love of our marriages and families, make that new creation a reality—fragile perhaps, but real. Our homes and families become places of peace and a bright light in a dark world.

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Unity Prayer: God, make our hearts one. Amen.



Micah 6:1–5

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

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Reading: Micah 6:1–5

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ² Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³ "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵ O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

Meditation

We have a heavenly courtroom scene here. The mountains and the hills are the jury, and the Lord will be the prosecuting attorney and the judge. The whole case turns on righteousness. God is righteous; see the evidence of his saving actions. The people will be righteous if God the judge declares that they are in relationship with him. For the people to be righteous they will need to do the sort of things that a person in relationship with God does. They must be humble and just. They must show mercy and compassion to the outcast, the weak, the orphan, and the widow. Their righteousness and justice must be accompanied by peace.

So the Lord pleads his case. What has he done to offend his people? The Hebrew word for "saving acts" is *tsdikah*, the righteousness of God. His righteous, saving actions include rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, giving them the leadership of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. They include directing Balaam to pronounce a blessing rather than a curse. They include bringing his people across the Jordan River into the promised land.

How does one repay saving acts? By being righteous, of course. But that is to define the word with itself. For God righteousness *is* his saving acts. For us, "righteousness" is not primarily an ethical quality; rather, it is a relationship. God will pronounce a verdict in this court case. He will pronounce his decision about the state of our relationship with him.

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Unity Prayer: *God, make our hearts one. Amen.*



Micah 6:6–8

Pray

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-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Micah 6:6–8

"With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" ⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Meditation

It is the people's turn to answer God's charges. They proceed not with evidence of their right response to his gracious saving actions, but with whiny questions dripping with sarcasm. If we had video of this, you could probably see them rolling their eyes in spite. What does God want now? Year-old calves, thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Does he want us to sacrifice our children like the other gods? Frankly, I'm surprised that lightning, thunder, earthquakes, and fire didn't consume them on the spot for their insolence. But that is not God's way. He reminds them that he expects them to act justly, love with tender mercy, and walk humbly with God. In short, he expects them to be righteous.

Righteousness is a wonderfully complex concept. And as in the previous meditation, it is about relationship. Righteousness is God's saving actions; it is his declaration of our being in relationship with him, a gift which we cannot earn. Righteousness is also the only appropriate response of a grateful people. The righteous person is just. But this means not simply giving each person his due; it includes showing mercy and compassion to the outcast, the weak, the orphan, and the widow. These are the qualities that God expects from his spouse, who, after all, is called to share one life with him.

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Unity Prayer: God, make our hearts one. Amen.



Isaiah 24:5–12

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Isaiah 24:5–12

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. ⁶ Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. ⁷ The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. ⁸ The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. ⁹ No longer do they drink wine with singing; strong drink is bitter to those who drink it. ¹⁰ The city of chaos is broken down, every house is shut up so that no one can enter. ¹¹ There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine; all joy has reached its eventide; the gladness of the earth is banished. ¹² Desolation is left in the city, the gates are battered into ruins.

Meditation

We want to remember the line, “the wine dries up.” When the wine dries up, joy has departed the land. It is part of the terrible cost of covenant breaking. Judah will long for the coming of the Messiah who will renew the covenant and bring salvation to the people; joy will return. We point it out here because we know that the day will come when Mary the mother of Jesus will be at a wedding and will turn to her son and say, “they have no wine.”

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Unity Prayer: *God, make our hearts one. Amen.*



Isaiah 25:6–10

Pray

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-Lord, make haste to help us.

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-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: Isaiah 25:6–10

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. ⁹ It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. ¹⁰ For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain.

Meditation

On that day it will be said, “This is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.” Nearly 700 years after Isaiah spoke this word, they ran out of wine at a wedding feast in the small Galilean village of Cana. That was the day that God revealed his presence, revealed his glory. Jesus who was a guest at that wedding did what only God could do. He turned ordinary water into the best wine that had ever been tasted. It was the first of the signs that revealed his glory, his identity. He took this occasion to announce that the long-awaited day had dawned. The great feast of Isaiah 25 had begun. The last of his great signs was his death on the cross where he, true God and true man, revealed the depth of God’s love for us. His resurrection proved that death had been defeated and promised that one day all tears would be wiped away. Now we can say, “This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

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