

Living In Interesting Times

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Date: 24 November 2019

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[0 : 00] Well, this phrase, may you live in interesting times, is supposed to be an old Chinese curse.

Well, as I said earlier on, there is no doubt whatsoever that we are living through interesting times. An election has been called, the first general election to be held in December for a hundred years. And the question everybody is asking is, will it give us parliamentary clarity? Will it give us the clarity we need? Or will it just be more of the same?

Who knows? And meanwhile, we watch all the old favourites disappear from the high streets. Woolworths, there was a Woolworths in Stornoway wasn't there?

One of the first victims of the recession, now it's Thomas Cook. Mothercare, of all things mothercare, old certainties are crumbling. Is what we hear on the news the truth? Or is it fake news?

[1 : 14] Is that film we're watching showing us what really happened? Or has it been doctored? And of course, the icing on the cake these days, am I a boy or am I a girl?

Or am I neither? Or am I both? Confusion. We live through interesting times. What unease there is in our society today. And it's not just because of Brexit.

We are living through interesting times. And speaking for myself, I don't really like it. I'm not really enjoying it. Now the Prophet Isaiah was preaching to people who were living through interesting times as well.

550 years before Christ, after a long period of stability, change was coming. You may know that Judah was just one of a number of nations that had been conquered by the Babylonians. And Jerusalem was just one of a number of cities that had been reduced to rubble by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. So on the streets of Babylon, Jews rubbed shoulders with members of other races that had been conquered and had been relocated to the capital city of the empire. And there they settled, there they established their businesses, there they raised their families.

[2 : 43] And it seemed that things were going to go on like that forever. But Babylon was a spent force. And after Nebuchadnezzar's death, his empire began to crumble.

And there was a new force to contend with in the north. Cyrus, ruler of one of the Persian tribes, was gathering his forces.

He was rallying other tribes to his cause. They were breaking free from their overlords. And crucially, they were uniting with their neighbors, the Medes, hence the Medes and the Persians. And they had a prize in sight, a big prize, nothing less than babble on itself. New alliances were being created, old ones were being broken, the very centre of power was shifting.

It was an unsettling time. Now we are all affected by what happens on the world stage. All of us, wherever we are, so there's a war in some faraway country, refugees are washed up on our shores, acute poverty in Vietnam, and a gruesome discovery in the back of a lorry in Essex.

[4 : 12] And of course, behind every announcement of redundancies, there are hundreds if not thousands of individual workers, we are all affected. No one is insulated, no one can remain detached.

What do we as Christians have to say that is different from anybody else? What hope is there? What comfort is there in the Bible, provided for a people who are being swept along by events that are beyond our control?

And I wonder if the people in Isaiah's day were saying to him, come on Isaiah, you're God's prophet, what is God up to? What is God doing? Is he doing anything?

And Isaiah was, yes, God is doing something. God is not idle, God is active. The Lord God isn't just reacting to events, all events originate in heaven.

All empires rise and fall at His direction. God is active, God is active for His glory. He is active for the ultimate good of His people.

[5 : 32] And so as Isaiah says here in verse 20, that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel created this.

So what I want us to do for the rest of our time this evening, is just to look at what Isaiah says here and how he seeks to bring comfort to the confused and frightened people of God.

And in many ways, this is a sermon that will take these people back to the basics of their faith, who they are and who they are called to be.

And Isaiah begins here in verse 1, listen to me in silence, O coastlands, let the peoples renew their strength.

Silence in court says Isaiah. The Lord is summoning the coastlands, the nations to come before Him in His court at the place of judgment.

[6 : 39] And the Lord has some evidence to set before them, evidence that should persuade them that He is the true and the living God, the God whom they should worship and trust.

Now do not miss the significance of this summons. It is addressed to the coastlands, to the islands, to the nations, to the whole world.

God is speaking to the whole world. You see, the Lord God was never just Israel's God. The God of this little, tiny country called Israel actually laid claim to the whole planet, to every single human being.

Israel's calling was to be a missionary nation. Just as the Lord had called their ancestor Abraham from the ends of the earth, their mission was to take what had been revealed to them to their pagan neighbors to the ends of the earth, to the ends of the globe.

So here in verse 1, the Lord is saying, listen to me in silence, O coastlands, let the peoples renew their strength. Here is Isaiah the evangelist.

[7 : 56] Here he is inviting the Gentile nations to put their hope in the Lord to trust in the God of Israel. They can have what Israel had.

Actually, it's these very messes that allow us today in the year 2019, here in Calaway, in the island of Lewis, to hear this sermon from Isaiah as if he was speaking to us.

The promises that he brings to God's ancient people, the comfort and the assurances, they are for all who hope in the Lord, he says.

They are for all who hope in the Lord. Do and Gentile alike will renew their strength, he says. Let the peoples renew their strength.

Now that harkens back to the very last verse of chapter 40. But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

[9 : 03] So what Isaiah is doing here is he is laying evidence before the nations, the evidence is this, that there is a new world order coming, a new force to be reckoned with, a force that conquers everything in its path.

Now later on in Isaiah in chapter 44 and 45, Isaiah will identify the emperor Cyrus, the Persian. He is that power.

But for the moment, things are left vague. But here is the point, the Lord God is claiming that he is behind this new power.

Look at verse 2. Who stirs up one from the east whom victory makes at every step. He gives up nations before him so that he tramples kings underfoot.

He makes him like dust with his sword, like driven, struggle, stubble with his bow. Who, who did this? The Lord is saying, I did this.

[10 : 06] Now Cyrus would never know this. Cyrus would probably never believe it. Eventually Cyrus would conquer the Babylonians and he is the one who gave the order that the Jews could return to their homeland, fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy.

Through Cyrus's pagan, the Lord would fulfill his promise that the exile would come to an end.

Verse 4, I the Lord, the first and with the last, I am he.

I, says the Lord, am responsible. I am responsible for the rise and fall of empires, for the rise and fall of the Egyptians and the Philistines and the Syrians and the Assyrians and now the

Babylonians.

Every power, be it a nation state, be it an international conglomerate, be it an all pervasive philosophy.

I am with the first and the last of them, says the Lord. Because friends, there will be a last power, a power that will seek to dominate, a power that will seek to control our thinking and our choices and it too will come crashing down to make way for the kingdom of God and the day will come when all heaven will sing.

[11 : 29] The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ and He will reign forever and ever. Friends, what difference it makes when our outlook has this absolute certainty that the Lord our God is in control.

He is in control of all events. What a difference it makes to our attitude towards those setbacks in life, to those disappointments in life.

What a difference it makes when we remind ourselves that the Lord our God knows what He is doing. It's a bit like this.

You've ever been on a bus or a train and the window is so filthy, you can't see out. You have no idea where you are, you're trying to, you know, you're trying, but the dirt's all on the outside, you're not quite sure where you are.

But don't panic, the driver knows where you are. The driver knows where you're going. He can see clearly ahead. The Lord God is sovereign.

[12 : 41] He is in control. He knows where He's taking us. Now in verse 5, the prophet says, the coastlands have seen and are afraid.

The ends of the earth tremble. They have drawn near and come. Everyone helps his neighbour and says to his brother, be strong.

The craftsman strengthens a goldsmith and he who smooths with the hammer, him who strikes the anvil saying of the soldering, it is good. And they strengthen it with nails so that it cannot be moved.

What he's talking about there is how the coastlands and nations, they're not listening to God.

They're not listening. They are reverting to type. They are turning to their idols.

But these idols of the world, they have to be nailed down. So they don't topple over. The gods that the unbeliever instinctively turns to, turns to for stability, are themselves unstable.

[13 : 54] The God that he hopes will bring him security, are themselves insecure. Banks, multinational corporations, the stock exchange, governments.

Nothing is certain. Nothing is secure. Even our own families, even the ones we love the most, cannot always be guaranteed to provide us with the certainties that we long for.

There is only one who is certain. Only one who remains unshaken no matter what. The Lord God Himself.

Heaven and earth will pass away, said Jesus, but my words will never pass away. The Lord God, His word, His throne are firmly established and will never pass away.

The world turns to its idols. The world turns to its unstable gods. But what about us? What about the people of God?

[15 : 09] We are just as affected by all the turmoil that goes on in the international stage. Our jobs, our houses, our pensions, they aren't supernaturally protected.

And the Jews in exile felt vulnerable. They felt very vulnerable. You see, they had come to the conclusion that the exile in Babylon meant that God had abandoned them.

Prophets like Genomai and Hosea and Micah had warned them, warned them that if they did not repent of their sins, the Lord God would have to take drastic action and that is exactly what he did.

Now in the ancient world, if you were defeated by your enemy, you came to the conclusion that it's because your enemy's gods were stronger than your gods.

There would be a battle going on in the heavens while you were battling down on earth. And if you were defeated, it's because your enemy's gods were stronger than your gods.

[16 : 16] But uniquely, uniquely the Jews did not come to that conclusion. Uniquely, the Jews believed that it was their own God who had orchestrated their defeat.

And they're not sure what to do now. The pagans could automatically turn to their gods, but the Jews were not certain. Can we do the same? Can we still turn to God? They're like, you know what it's like with children, when they've been given a huge telling off for doing something they know fine well they shouldn't have done.

And they're in the doghouse and they're longing for that cuddle, that hug from mum or dad, but they don't know if they're allowed. They don't know if they'll be accepted.

What does it need? It needs mum or dad to go to them, to hold them tight, to assure them that they're forgiven, to assure them that they're not rejected.

Well, this is what's going on here, look at verse 89. 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 furthest corners, saying to you, you are my servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you off, fear not, for I am with you.

[17:40] Words of supreme comfort and reassurance. Actually, we might think that when God calls Israel his servant, is that not a bit demeaning, but from their point of view in those days, everybody was a servant of some God.

And so what the Lord is doing here is he's saying, you are my servant, my chosen servant. He's not forgotten his promise to Abraham, to be the God of his descendants.

So despite their sin, despite the rebellion, the Lord had not abandoned them. And so he says to them in verse 10, fear not, for I am with you.

Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Do not fear, for I am with you. That command, do not fear, constantly repeated throughout scripture.

[18:52] Constantly. Isn't it interesting that scripture never ever says, you have nothing to fear. You never read that, you have nothing to fear.

The Bible never denies the reality of those things that can indeed strike fear into our hearts. Ill health or redundancy or financial ruin. As Christians, we never bury our heads in the sand. Actually, of all people, we're the most realistic. The Bible tells us not to fear and tells us why. It's not because there's nothing to fear, it's because our God is with us.

And he will strengthen us and help us and uphold us. He will strengthen us, uphold us. Because our faith, the Christian faith, is not a self-help faith.

It's not about self-help. Actually, the Bible is brutally honest with us. Verse 14, do not be afraid, O Wyrms Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you.

[19:51] Wyrms Jacob again, that's not very helpful, is it? It's demeaning, it's insulting, but that's not what's going on there. That's how God's people felt.

They felt that they were little worms. They felt their own inadequacy, they felt their own helplessness. And actually, that's what the Lord wants.

That's the whole point of the exile. Ha-ra-ra, they'd finally got it. And it's only now that they are admitting that their own strength isn't strong enough and their own wisdom isn't wise enough.

So now they're ready to listen. Now they're ready to hear the voice of the Lord. Now they're ready to receive God's grace. And it's here in verse 14 that the Lord reveals the depths of his love for them, his passion and commitment to little Israel.

He reveals himself as their redeemer. Fear not, you Wyrms Jacob, you men of Israel, I am the one who helps you declare the Lord, your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.

[21:08] Redeemer is a word that we tend to use in the church and not really anywhere else. In Bible times, the redeemer was a close relative who helped you when you had fallen in hard times.

For example, you became so poor that you had to sell your land. Your redeemer was expected to buy the land back for you. I suppose the most famous story in the Bible with a redeemer is in the Book of Ruth where Boaz gives Naomi's redeemer the chance to buy her land so that she can keep it in the family.

But of course, as a rider with the land, a wife comes along with it as well, Ruth. And so the first redeemer turns it down. And so Boaz, who's next in line, he gladly steps in.

And actually that story shows us that acting as a redeemer was not compulsory. It required a willingness. And so the Lord God fear is saying to his people, I am your redeemer, I love you so much, I am so committed to you that I will act willingly to save you.

I will do for you what you cannot do for yourself. I hear in there an echo of the Exodus when the Lord God rescued his helpless people from slavery in Egypt.

[22:29] We say that in verses 17, 18 and 19, talking about the poor and the needy, searching for water and tongues, parts with thirst, a reminder of the wilderness experience.

But what does the Lord say here, verses 17, 18 and 19, when the poor and needy seek water and there is none, and their tongues are parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them, I will open rivers on the bare heights and fountains in the midst of the valleys, I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land springs of water, I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle and the olive, I will set in the desert the cypress, the plain and the pine together.

So Isaiah is assuring his people that God has not changed. Just as he redeemed their ancestors from slavery and provided for them in the desert, he will redeem this present generation from their exile and carry them back to the promised land, and the result will be, as it says in verse 20, they will see and they will know, they will consider and understand together that the hand of the Lord has done this.

And then themselves will be changed. If you look at verse 15, he says, behold, I make of you a threshing sledge, new, sharp and having teeth, you shall thresh the mountains and crush them, you shall make the hills chaff.

Now, you know that's a picture from the farms. The threshing sledge was a sledge with sharp stones or pieces of metal stuck to the base of it, and the farmer would pull it through the fields and it would chop up the straw and the wind would blow away the chaff, the rubbish, but the heavier good stuff would remain behind.

[24 : 26] So what do we have here? One becomes a threshing sledge used by the Lord to judge the nations, to remove those mountains, to remove those insurmountable objects, and instead of being fearful and dismayed, they would become the worshiping, adoring people that they were called to be, rejoicing in the Lord and glorying in the Holy One of Israel.

That was the promise to God's people. Friends, we too live in interesting times and Brexit is the least of it, isn't it?

The church in Scotland is in a similar state of disarray, and it seems that even the church is powerless in the face of an implacable philosophy that gives first place to human reason and human desire, rather than to the will of God.

Can we not identify with Israel's self-assessment? O Wym Jacob, O little Israel, but you know what?

Even that assessment actually lies our hope because the Lord still says to His people, do not be afraid, O Jacob, do not be afraid, O Wym Jacob, O little Israel, I am your Redeemer.

[26 : 08] I think about what the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, in 2 Corinthians 12, where he said that we need to learn to delight in weaknesses, insults and hardships and persecutions and difficulties because God's grace is as sufficient for us as it was for the Apostle.

God's power is still made perfect in weakness. We don't know what the end of the matter will be, but the danger is that we lose hope.

We lose hope in the sovereignty of the Lord, and we stop trusting in Him. If that should happen, if we will lose more than just the church, we will lose our identity as God's chosen people.

And that will be true no matter what situation we face, be it in the church or at the home or in business. Boyle, boyle, there's no shortage of reasons to be trembling these days.

But we believe in the God who is behind it all, the God who is the cause of it all. And we believe that this God is still working out His purposes as year succeeds to year till the day comes when the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

[27 : 30] And we believe that there is a Redeemer, one who will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We believe that there is one who has rescued us from the exile that was imposed on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when they were banished from Eden.

And we believe that on the cross of Calvary, the Lord Jesus Christ died to reconcile sinful men and women to their God. And we believe that in the end, when all exile is over, and the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, all the coastlands will see, all the islands will see, all the peoples will see, and they will consider, and they will understand the hand of the Lord has done all this, the Holy One of Israel, He has created it all.

Let's pray together. Our God and our Father, we consider Your ancient Word, Word spoken to bring comfort to Your ancient people, and remarkably, amazingly, miraculously, this Word still speaks to Your people today.

Lord God, there certainly is no shortage of things to cause us fear and anxiety.

Even just to start thinking about the future would cause us to come out in a cold sweat. But Lord, Your Word still speaks to us. It still says, fear not, fear not.

[29 : 14] I am Your Redeemer, and I have done it. Oh, Heavenly Father, help us never to doubt Your hand, Your providential hand in all things.

We scratch your heads, we do not understand, but we also know Lord, that You have not left Your throne, the Lord is still on the throne, and You are still working things out, so that the day will come when every knee will bow before Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord to Your praise and to Your glory.

All we can say is Lord, haste the day. Lord, haste the day we pray, and Jesus name. Amen.