How well acquainted are you with the Book of Isaiah? I’m willing to bet that most of you know more than you think you do. However, I also suspect that most of you do not know as much as you should in order to better understand Jesus. Did you know that in the gospels, Jesus quotes numerous prophets, but more than half of his quotes are from Isaiah? As we will see next week, in Jesus’ first sermon, when he declared the mission of his ministry, he quoted Isaiah. Further, the four suffering servant passages in Isaiah bear an uncanny resemblance to Jesus.

However, the influence of Isaiah on Christianity reaches beyond the use Jesus made of the prophet. Isaiah “is far more often quoted or alluded to in the Gospels, Acts, the Letters of Paul and Revelation than any other part of scripture. One estimate concludes that there are 250 passages in the New Testament which hearken back to Isaiah.”

When some of us visited Bethlehem a few years ago, we went to the Church of the Nativity. We descended the steps into a cave-like basement where Jerome, one of the early church leaders, sat for years and translated the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into Latin. Jerome said Isaiah “should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet because he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the Church so clearly.” And despite the fact that Isaiah lived more than 500 years before Jesus, many of the early Church Fathers referred to the Book of Isaiah as the “Fifth Gospel.”

Isaiah had a profound influence not only on Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, but on the history of “the Church, English literature and western European culture… (Titles given to Christ) – Immanuel, Prince of Peace and the Key of David – all come from Isaiah. Guess where you will find the following familiar expressions: ‘swords into plowshares’, ‘the wolf dwelling with the lamb’, ‘a voice crying in the wilderness.’ Where will you find those? Isaiah! Where will you find: ‘a man of sorrow’, ‘a light to the nations’, ‘good news to the poor’? Isaiah. What about ‘A new heaven and a new earth’ and ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer?’ Isaiah!

This one is for our choir only: One of the masterpieces of music, Handel’s Messiah, is based primarily on what book of the Bible? Isaiah!

Further, countless paintings derive their inspiration from the prophet. Quaker Minister, Edward Hicks, had more than one painting of the Peaceable Kingdom. There are numerous paintings of the wolf and the lamb feeding together and beating Swords into Plowshares.
A great deal of Jewish literature and music is based on themes from Isaiah, and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin quoted Isaiah to express his commitment to peace at the historic meeting with Yasser Arafat.

Isaiah featured prominently in the writings of early Christian leaders, especially the Apostle Paul, to give authority to Paul’s mission to the gentile world. Regrettably, the Book of Isaiah was also used numerous times in the history of the church to support anti-Semitism.

Isaiah’s influence is immense. However, in my sermon series, I simply hope to make us aware of the enormous influence he had on Jesus, because the more we know about Isaiah, the better we understand Jesus.

This morning we look at the first of the servant songs – four passages in Isaiah that speak of a servant of God who carries out God’s desires. Scholars have never nailed down the identity of the servant because sometimes the servant is regarded as an individual, other times as the Hebrew people and still other times as a group within ancient Israel. Some scholars believe the identity is left unclear intentionally in order that the servant’s work rather than identity remains the focus.

Before we get to our passage in chapter 42, it is essential to know that the first 39 chapters of Isaiah describe God’s people as rebellious and disobedient, and warn the people to change their ways or destruction awaits them. In the first chapter, speaking through Isaiah, God says, “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good.” Then God describes what God expects: “Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (Isaiah 1:16-17)

The people are expected to do what is right and just. They are to treat others fairly and they are to provide special care for the most vulnerable in society.

In the Bible, the word “justice” carries two meanings. Occasionally it is used in administering a deserved punishment; usually God punishing the people for failing to do what is right. However, the more common use of “justice” is a command to treat people with fairness and kindness. The passage from the first chapter of Isaiah is typical of how the word is used. It focuses on showing mercy to the poor and defenseless.

In Isaiah 1-39, we read that the people do not heed God’s warnings to do justice. Greed, exploitation and lack of compassion permeate society. Such injustice cannot continue without consequences. Eventually, society begins to crumble. Outside powers exploit their weakness. The people are defeated in battle, their homes destroyed and they are taken into captivity in Babylon.

After a lengthy exile, a word of hope comes from God. The people will return home. However, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out, the homecoming “is not to a self-indulgent future...Liberated, the restored people are given a new mandate, to be God’s servant people in the world, in order to establish God’s well-being in the world. The new, restored people are to do what the people in chapters 1-39 failed to do: Justice.”

Today’s passage begins: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.” (Isaiah 42:1-4a)

If we turn to the Gospel of Matthew, we discover that the writer, in describing Jesus, quotes this very passage from Isaiah. Matthew says that in his ministry, Jesus proclaims and brings forth justice. Thus, God expects the
Israelites and the followers of Jesus to do what is right and just by insuring that the poor are not exploited but treated fairly and by extending mercy to those who need healing.

A man was explaining to a pastor why he did not need to take his son to church. He said, “Listen to what my son wrote. ‘Children are starving with empty bellies in faraway lands. They have nothing to eat. All around them they hear the sounds of gunfire and bombs going off. And it made me realize that we are so lucky. We are so lucky to be living here and not there.’

The man said his son’s words brought tears to his eyes because he realizes that his son really gets it. He knows to be grateful for a good life. The father said, “And at that moment, when my son recognized all that suffering and how fortunate he was, I could not have been prouder.”

The pastor raised her eyebrows and countered, “Really? That’s it? We’re so lucky that we live here instead of there.”

She went on to point out that the perspective you get in a Christian community is quite different. The church challenges you to move from feeling lucky to taking action. “When you witness pain and declare yourself lucky, you have fallen way short of what...God would have you do...God want us to witness pain and suffering and rather than feeling lucky, God wants us to get angry and do something about it...The hungry don’t get fed, the homeless don’t get sheltered and the world doesn’t change because people who are doing just fine feel lucky.”5

Isaiah and Jesus challenge us to see not only what is, but what can be. They want to evoke within us a sense of outrage with the way things are, so that we will become passionate about making things better.

Many great advances in human culture accomplished by just causes have been spearheaded by people of faith. The movement to abolish slavery in England, which occurred decades prior to the American Civil War, was led by William Wilberforce and John Newton. Their religious convictions motivated them to abolish this horrific abuse of human beings and their faith that gave them the courage to strive for what was right and just despite powerful opposition.

People of faith were among those leading the charge to institute child labor laws and universal suffrage. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and numerous Christian leaders led the march for Civil Rights and maintained a non-violent movement because of their Christian beliefs. In South Africa, Bishop Desmond Tutu was a key figure in overcoming apartheid while avoiding a bloody revolution. The passion that drove him was his belief that each person is a child of God created in God’s image, and therefore is entitled to justice.

Bishop Tutu said, “If each person is created in God’s image, it means that oppression and injustice are not merely evil – which they are – and not just painful – which they frequently will be for the victim – it means they are blasphemous! It is like spitting in the face of God.”

God wants all people to be guided by certain moral principles and I believe that from the moment we are born, God’s Spirit influences us in subtle, unconscious ways. God’s spiritual energy urges us to be loving and just. That is why nearly all people, religious or not – unless they suffer from antisocial personality disorder – have a built-in sense of fairness. It is why we experience such satisfaction when we are compassionate to others or do something to further the cause of justice. We know in our soul that it is the right thing to do.

This time of year we focus on expressing our gratitude to God in tangible ways. In our current Stewardship Campaign, we remember the importance of being a generous person and making a concrete demonstration of our commitment to God. But make no mistake; giving a portion of our income to the church also promotes
justice. We support both homeless and feeding ministries and many other ministries that extend kindness and mercy to people who are poor, to people struggling with addictions and abuse, and to people who live with the curse of mental illness.

Will you support our community of faith in striving for justice?

There is an ancient Turkish proverb that says, “One hour of justice is worth seventy hours of prayer.” From all I know about Isaiah and Jesus, I’d say that ratio is just about right.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p.3.
3. Ibid.