

“No Rock like Our Rock”

Isaiah 44:1-8

December 28, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

About a year ago, I preached a series of sermons on the book of Isaiah. Due to the economic events of the past four months, we are in a much better position now than we were at the time to understand this prophet. The nation Isaiah addressed was under a threat far more serious than our own. Two mighty nations were threatening the little nation of Judah. Assyria was the superpower of the 8th century BC, the time during which Isaiah lived and prophesied. Its army was on the move, and no nation could withstand its might. Even Egypt, the other mighty nation of this era, proved unable to defeat Assyria. A large part of the first half of Isaiah is the word from the Lord that Judah would not be handed over to the Assyrians. God would deliver them, and they were to trust in him.

The second half of Isaiah predicts a new threat, from the nation of Babylon. They were the superpower next in line after Assyria, and Isaiah had a different message for his people concerning Babylon. Isaiah brought this word to King Hezekiah: **“Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord”** (39:6). These are dreadful things. For decades they lived under the fear of an Assyrian captivity, and then God tells them that where the Assyrians failed, the Babylonians would succeed. Where we may be threatened with a loss of wealth, they were threatened with an end to life as they knew it. In warfare, people get killed and property gets plundered. And if you lose, the result is something that most people in Isaiah’s day regarded as worse than death—exile. To be exiled was to be cut off from all that was precious, from community and family and familiar routines.

As bad as all this is, the second half of Isaiah declares comfort to God’s people. Isaiah 40 begins with these well-known words. **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”** One of the sources of that comfort is found in our passage this morning, in verse 8 where God says, **“Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.”** What God is saying to us through Isaiah is that no matter what problems we may face in 2009, whether financial, health-related or relational, our chief comfort lies in disagreeing with the dominant religious belief of our culture. The dominant belief is that the gods worshipped by all religions are basically the same. We just assign different names to these gods, but they are roughly equivalent. Isaiah does not agree, claiming that there is no Rock like ours. Our big need in the face of major threats in life is to know this unique God and take refuge in him as our Rock. Let me point out three ways in which our God is unique.

I. He Alone Controls the Future

God gives a challenge in verse 7 to any other beings who want to lay claim to being God. **“Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.”** It is not an easy thing to predict the future. There are abundant examples of failed attempts to do so. In 1962, the Decca Recording Company was considering signing a new band to a recording contract and decided not to do so. “We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out,” they said as they rejected the Beatles. Ken Olson, president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corporation said in 1977, “There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.” Knowing the difficulty of predicting the future with any kind of accuracy, we tolerate a high error rate among our leaders. But not so in the Bible. One of the marks of a prophet in the Bible was an error rate of zero in his predictions. Deuteronomy 18:22 says it like this. **“When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him”**

The book of Isaiah is striking in the accuracy of its future predictions. Isaiah lived and ministered in the late 8th century, from around 740 BC until around 701 BC. During these years, Assyria represented the major force threatening Judah's safety. The first 39 chapters of the book deal mostly with this threat. But then chapters 40-66 deal with the next two superpowers after Assyria, Babylon and Persia. Isaiah goes so far as to name the King of Persia in chapter 45. Cyrus was the king when Judah returned from exile to their homeland in 516 BC, almost two hundred years after Isaiah died. That's why many modern skeptics reject the unity of this book under the authorship of the 8th century prophet, Isaiah. They believe in two or three different authors of the book simply because they can't accept that a man writing in 710 BC could give the name of a king in 516 BC. The historical accuracy is so great that they are convinced this must be an historical writing rather than prophetic. But we believe that this entire book was written by the 8th century prophet, Isaiah, because he was inspired by the God who knows the future. He doesn't just know the broad outline of the future, though even that would be an amazing thing. He also knows the details, including the name of individual rulers. The Bible says, **“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord”** (Prov. 16:33). The lot is a type of ancient dice, so that something as small as whether a six or a one appears face up on the dice is from the Lord's hand.

There was a music CD our family listened to years ago that had the following line in one of the songs: “I may not know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.” That expresses well the thought of verses 7-8. We don't know the future and we never will. But our God not only knows the future, but controls it as well. This is one of the things that makes God a Rock of refuge. Think about that image of a rock for just a moment. One of the features of a rock is that it

remains unmoved even in tumultuous circumstances. A tornado can come through and level giant trees, but it won't be able to move the rock that has its roots deep in the ground. If you can attach yourself to that rock, you will be able to withstand even the severest of storms. A rock of refuge has no meaning unless there is something from which we need refuge. This is where so many people go astray in knowing what it means to trust God. Many people think that if we trust God, he will keep us from undergoing troubles or deliver us quickly when we enter into them. So, someone loses a job and then looks to God to provide them quickly with another even better paying job. That is not what Isaiah means when he says that God is our Rock.

We can see this more clearly when we remember the context of this promise that God is our Rock. Back in chapter 39, God had said that Babylon would succeed in its efforts to conquer the nation of Judah. They would be taken into exile, and life as they had known it would end. And since the exile would last for 70 years, the vast majority of the people taken would never return again to their homeland. Here's what we learn from that. Trusting God for our future means that we sometimes must look to God to deliver us *in* our troubles, not *from* our troubles. To trust God means to receive this word from him that there would be a captivity. Or to say it differently, trusting God means that we deal with the reality we have rather than the reality we want.

Let me give an illustration. Since Matthew and Meredith have returned home for Christmas, our family has been playing the card game "Spades." A good Spades player adjusts to a new reality after every trick is played. So, if you are holding the King of Spades and someone plays the Ace of Spades on a particular hand, reality changes so that you now hold the highest card in your hands. To play the game well requires that adjustments be made after every trick. Trusting God as our Rock is the same. He knows and controls the future, so we don't need to be living with regret about how we got to where we are. God is our Rock right now, and he can be trusted with today's reality. Many of you have been very kind in praying for Wendy's health issues. We continue to pray for God's complete healing of her, but we also recognize that the God who controls the future may decide to be her Rock of refuge in the midst of chronic health issues that will endure throughout her lifetime. That's what God was telling the nation of Judah here. He would be their Rock, but it would be in exile in Babylon, which was not the future they would have chosen for themselves. Looking to God as our Rock in this sense means that we turn the corner from living for a different future reality to accepting the present reality as our new reality in which God has placed us and will be a refuge to us.

II. He Alone Transforms Lives

As we look to God as our Rock of refuge, something happens to us. We begin to change in very positive ways. Verses 3-5 speak of this transformation by

talking about the giving of the Holy Spirit. God says to Judah as he looks to their time of exile that he will pour out his Spirit upon them. The idea of pouring communicates abundance. When we say, "It's pouring outside," we don't mean that it's drizzling or lightly raining. We mean that it is like someone in heaven has turned over a giant bucket and poured it out all at once. If you go out in such a rain, you will get drenched very quickly. God promises here that he will give of his Spirit with just such an abundance.

What happens when God pours out his Spirit? **"They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams"** (v. 4). There will be fruitfulness, and it will begin with calling upon the Lord. **"This one will say, 'I am the Lord's,' another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'The Lord's'"** (v. 5). There is a deep joy in belonging to God that is communicated here.

Note a couple of things about this transformation that comes as the Spirit is poured out. First, the Spirit is poured out during the desert times of life. **"I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground"** (v. 3). What would you choose between the following two options? Option 1 would include a 2009 characterized by smooth sailing in every area of life. You get promoted at work, your 401(k) increases in value by 25%, both your car and house keep working with nothing breaking, you lose that 25 pounds you have been wanting to lose and never get sick for the entire year. But there is a spiritual dryness to your life. You are bored with God and with church. Option 2 involves encountering some rough seas in 2009. Things don't go so well at work. Your old car finally breaks down, but you don't have enough money to replace it with anything other than another jalopy. Then you get really sick and have to go to the hospital, where you run up medical bills you can't afford. But as bad as things are, verses 3-5 have been realized in your life. There is great joy in knowing the Lord and some significant fruitfulness in your life. Though your trials have not been easy and you would not have chosen to undergo them, at every point God has ministered to you in such significant ways that life has become something of an adventure. It's like there's been a contest between the trials and God's nurturing presence and power, and God has won every contest.

How do we get this filling of God's Spirit? Isaiah tells us in verse 1, in a verb that is often missed. **"But now hear, O Jacob my servant."** We need to hear God's promise when he speaks to us. The way to be filled with the Spirit who transforms us is to be filled with the word of his promise. To be filled with his word and Spirit fills us with hope and all the good things springing from it.

Only God can transform us like this. I do want to point out, though, that worshipping gods other than our God brings a change as well. Isaiah speaks of that transformation in verses 18-20, but it is not a welcome change. Verses 9-17 speak of the folly of worshipping false gods. The chief of those false gods in our culture is the god of materialism, evidenced by the despair present in our culture

as that god has recently been exposed as weak and inept. Those who worship such false gods are changed in all the wrong ways. **“He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray”** (v. 20). Worshipping any but the true God leads to delusions.

III. He Alone Delivers from Fear

Twice in our passage, God tells us not to fear (vv. 2, 8). This is the word we need to hear from him. The God who controls the future tells us not to fear. One of the games we used to play at our children’s birthday parties in their younger years was a treasure hunt done in teams of two or three, with one team member blindfolded. The blindfolded person would have to listen to the team members who could see. When it comes to our future, we are blind. But the one who can see says to us, **“Fear not, nor be afraid”** (v. 8). God says to you, “Don’t be afraid of that job loss, that decline in your investments, that health scare you have received. I am your Rock, and I am sufficient for all these needs.”

There is an even bigger threat to us than a souring economy, and that’s the threat of God’s judgment. The first **“Fear not”** of this chapter speaks not of the fear of bad circumstances, but of the fear of God’s judgment. God had pronounced such judgment in the last verse of the previous chapter. **“Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary, and deliver Jacob to utter destruction and Israel to reviling.”** It’s another statement about the reality of the coming exile to Babylon. Then in the very next verse, God calls Israel his chosen, which he repeats in verse 2. **“Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.”** Jeshurun is clearly another name for Israel, but its meaning is not clear. The likely meaning is “upright ones.” It is a word that looks forward to the truth of our justification, our being declared righteous because of the transferred righteousness of Christ. What is our common response when bad things happen to us? We say, “I must have done something to deserve this.” The response of faith says, “I deserve far worse than I am now receiving, but God has chosen me for blessing, and in Christ I have a fullness of such blessing.” God says, “You will make it in 2009 because I have chosen you. You don’t need to fear ill circumstances, and you don’t need to fear my judgment due to your own sins. Because of Jesus, you are the upright ones whom I will bless.”

CONCLUSION:

One of the reasons we fall into fear and unbelief is that we embrace the wrong goals, goals often related to money, success and appearance. What would your life look like if instead of those kinds of goals, your number one goal this coming year would be to trust God, be filled with his transforming Spirit and not fear? May God help us all to do that!