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**March 25, 2012**



## **ADD TO THE COMMUNITY**

**Jim Wood, Senior Pastor**

Our Old Testament lesson this morning comes from the prophet Isaiah, the 49th chapter. I wanted to set this up, in a sense, by talking about B90X (reading through the Bible in 90 days). I'm about a half a day, maybe a day behind right now, but I found it to be an overwhelming gift to me. I've never read through the Bible that quickly. It's easy to get distracted because I want to stop at a lot of places and consider it. I want to review it. I want to do some research, but I have to keep going. By keeping going, I'm finding what we

might call meta-themes or a meta-story that is really overwhelming to me. I know I've known it but I've gotten it in a new way.

So, when I come to the prophets, I come to realize that I love Isaiah. I've always loved Isaiah. It's hard as a Christian not to love him because there is so much of a foretelling of the coming of Christ, the Messiah. I've been moved by two things in Isaiah. The first is that we find that Isaiah seems to have different contexts: perhaps, a historical context for the original prophet Isaiah and then, perhaps context from the "school of Isaiah".

That's not what I really want to talk about, but I want to simply say this: I've found two things that have really struck me. The first is that the Book of Isaiah is overwhelmingly concerned with trying to discern why it is that we've been beaten up; why it is that we are defeated. For example, in the 49th chapter it's obvious that we've already been destroyed as a nation, we've been sent out into Babylonian captivity. The feeling is that we've lost everything. We've lost it all. We have no hope. Why would we have hope when we've been taken out of our nation and it has been destroyed?

Isaiah wants to wrestle with why that happened. We find a theme throughout Isaiah that is overwhelmingly important for us because it's an understanding of the faith that, if we don't get, we're really lost. It happened not simply because we fell away from an understanding of God, but we fell away from an understanding of God that led us to abuse each other. We weren't caring for each other. We weren't providing for the poor and the needy, for the widow and the orphan.

What Isaiah wants to say is that it's not necessarily only a moral failure, but it's a theological failure. It's a failure to understand who God is and how God's love is for those who are in need. What we find in Isaiah is that not only it is for our own people that we didn't

provide, but it's also that we didn't provide for the needs of others outside our own community. I'm overwhelmed by that. Over and over Isaiah comes back to that. The second theme that is so meaningful to me is to consider again what the solution is. You see, if you're totally defeated, you've lost all hope. It seems like, "How in the world could this ever be restored? We've already been sent out. We're out in Babylon."

Where does the hope come? Isaiah wants to be very, very clear. The hope only comes in one way. It comes in a way that we don't think makes sense. Now for example, if you're a New York Jets fan you need a great quarterback to round it out. Or maybe, if you're a football fan – how many teams are out there looking to pick up a new player? The idea that you have to have a great quarterback, you have to have the great leader, you've got to have that one thing that will round it all out. So, what we would normally think is that if I'm a defeated people, in totally disarray and despair, and I've been sent out – the one thing I need is a big, powerful king! I need a big warrior. I need somebody who is going to come in and whoop up on those who whooped up on us.

But that's exactly what God says we're not going to get. Instead, we are going to get something that makes absolutely no logical sense. We're already in servitude. We're already slaves. We're already in bondage and we're going to get a servant. We're going to get a slave, in a sense. We're going to get one who's going to come in weakness. So, what we start to find from Isaiah, in that 49th chapter and intentionally as it goes forward, is this suffering servant who's going to absorb our own sins and then he's going to be the redemption for not only us, but for all the world.

This is so counter to what we would normally think. Let's listen for the Word of our Lord, the 49th chapter of the prophet Isaiah:

**Isaiah 49: 1-6**

*Listen to me, O coastlands,  
pay attention, you peoples from far away!  
The LORD called me before I was born,  
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.  
He made my mouth like a sharp sword,  
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;  
he made me a polished arrow,  
in his quiver he hid me away.  
And he said to me, 'You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'  
But I said, 'I have laboured in vain,  
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;  
yet surely my cause is with the LORD,  
and my reward with my God.'*

*And now the LORD says,  
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,  
to bring Jacob back to him,  
and that Israel might be gathered to him,  
for I am honoured in the sight of the LORD,  
and my God has become my strength —  
he says,  
'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to restore the survivors of Israel;*

*I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'*

Now, in the New Testament in the gospel of Luke, the 10th chapter, we're going to look at the first 12 verses and then jump down to verse 17. In these verses, Jesus has his twelve disciples and he's now expanding that number to seventy. He is sending them out and then they are to come back with a report. Listen, again, to this:

### **Luke 10: 1-12**

*After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house.*

*Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.*

And then in verse seventeen, we see their return.

### **Luke 10:17-20**

*The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'*

That's the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I want to stick with the football theme for a minute. It's easy because the season is far off and a number of you have been very disappointed in the way your brackets have worked out in the NCAA basketball tournament, so I think about this idea that we have that we pull for a certain team. We have a team and I'm a fan of this team.

I always wrestle with the Indianapolis Colts because, when I was a kid, I was a Baltimore Colts fan. I'm still resentful that the owner of the Colts brought a bunch of moving vans and literally moved the Colts in the middle of the night. They were taken to Indianapolis and so, now the question is, "Should I pull for the Colts now that they are in Indianapolis or should I not?"

Somebody came up to me after the first service and they said, "It's just easy to become a Ravens fan." But that's hard for me, rooting for a team that's named after poetry. I'm wrestling with these things. Why do we have these tribes? We all have tribes. I know for a number of you, I suspect, it's true. I know, for example, that if a young man goes to Duke University, and perhaps even goes to Duke Seminary, and perhaps even becomes a pastor, I know that it's really hard for that person, perhaps, to really pull for a different color or shade of blue (for the Tar Heels).

Then you start to think about that. Why is that? What's the difference between North Carolina and Duke? Really very little is different, right? Let's be honest, it's the same thing in my neck of the woods; it's South Carolina and Clemson and it gets to where this rivalry becomes the strongest between the folks that have the most in common. What is that about?

It's about being made to be loyal. There is something in our DNA as human beings that make us want to be loyal. We want to have a team. We want to have a cause. We want to have something to which we are loyal.

My dad, for example, was an Old Spice man. The idea is that my dad wouldn't use anything else but Old Spice. The fact that Old Spice is advertised by a Jamaican guy sitting on a horse wouldn't bother my dad, but I don't think my dad would get that. My dad was an Old Spice man, not because it was great advertising, but because he was an Old Spice man. That's just what he was. Same reason, I still feel uncomfortable ever riding in a Ford because my dad was a Chevrolet man. It is just built within me, this kind of sense of loyalty. What is the difference between the two?

But, you see, we are made to be loyal. We want to be loyal Americans. We want to be loyal to our Christian faith. We want to be loyal to our particular traditions. We had a moderator of our denomination, a female ruling elder, who was a great leader, but her opening sentence every time she spoke while she was the moderator was "I just want to say I'm sinfully proud of being a Presbyterian."

It was a way to generate this notion of having loyalty and a team that I can pull for. That's a good thing. It's great to be loyal. It's great to have a team. When we are in a tribe, we have a language. We have a common language that we share. We have a common understanding, a common history and that gives us grounding. It gives us a sense of

peace. It's a very meaningful and important thing. You see, to be on a team means that you can move the ball down the court. It means that you can get something accomplished when you're on a team. You have to form as a tribe, there's no question about that, but most good things often have a down side.

There is a down side to tribes. Let's look at in the international perspective. I don't know if you've been keeping up much with the international news but there was a fatwa that came out in Saudi Arabia a week or so ago by the Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz. He is a Sunni Muslim leader, one of the premier theologians in the Sunni tradition. A fatwa is when you make a legal, theological statement that is to be followed, in essence. The fatwa was that all churches in the Gulf nations should be destroyed. He based it on the understanding of some of the last words of the prophet Muhammad, supposedly, on his death bed. So, all churches in the Gulf region should be destroyed.

It's kind of interesting, when you think about it, if you know much about the Gulf region. It's not a big issue in Saudi Arabia anyway because in Saudi Arabia you can't have a church. There are three and a half million Christians that live in those Gulf nations. Most of them are foreigners, folks that come in and do work and sometimes servants or laborers, but in Saudi Arabia you can't. If you are a Christian, even as a foreigner, if you worship you must worship in secrecy in your own home.

I think the question came from someone in Kuwait. Now, that's the danger of a tribe because sometimes a tribe can start to be identified, not just by who is in us, but who's against us or on the outside. So, let's be honest about this and think about our own tribe and culture. How do we respond to that? We don't say much. We don't say much for a couple of reasons. Let's just be honest--one of the reasons we don't say much is because we are afraid. We don't want to stir up any

more terrorism. We don't want to stir up any unrest. We don't want to stir up any more stuff. We don't want to talk about that. And the other is that, perhaps, we want to avoid the conversation of faith and religion in almost all aspects of our life as best we can.

Let's move to an idea that's a little less radical, perhaps. Sheryl and I had this thought the other day. It's been almost a year and a half since we have seen our oldest son, Ross. He's in the Peace Corps in Morocco. We booked flights to go for a short visit at the end of May. I think about how it's a nation that we are involved with; we give a lot of aid. We see it as a moderate Muslim nation and we believe, in essence, that they believe in freedom of religion. If you are a Christian you're not persecuted for your religion. You can worship and you can be a Christian without that fear but you can't make anyone else a Christian. You can't convert to Christianity or it is, potentially, risking your life. Think about that for a bit. Let's bring it even a little closer to home.

A week ago Saturday, we started a new worship service. We are partnering with an urban church and they are going to worship with us once a month. Hopefully, they are going to grow and have services more often. It's a really exciting thing. Now, why didn't you come? You didn't come because we didn't invite you. We didn't tell you about it. The reason we didn't tell you about it is we didn't want you to come. We knew that if we were going to help form or be involved in partnering with an urban context church (and we all know what the code word for urban is, right?) we didn't want you to come. We know that if we're going to work with the urban folks, we need urban folks because that's the tribe. Now, the really exciting thing about that is we have a plan. We want that not to be the case long term but, you see, tribes really do control so much more than we want. So, let's bring it even a little closer to home.

We do a lot of urban ministry in our congregation. We don't see many urban folks to whom we minister at our worship. Why is that? Because we believe they wouldn't feel comfortable here, right? Isn't that what we would say? They wouldn't feel comfortable? What does that mean? It means we're a tribe. We would love to have anyone and everyone, as long as they feel comfortable with the way we do it. It's our tribal way. You see, here's the thing – this whole notion is that we have to start understanding what our tribe is as opposed to what our faith is. Now, let's contrast all of that with the Bible. When I look at the Bible, and I find it so meaningful, that at the heart of the faith is creation. At the beginning of the Bible, God created the world. Our God is a creator God. Our God's not a tribal god. Our God's not a God who said, "I'm going to only make one people."

Our God is the God of the universe. Our God created everyone, every single person. With seven billion people on the face of the earth, our God created every single one of them. Our God is a creator God who is the God of all. When we get to Isaiah 49, as we read it today, God says that when salvation truly comes, it's not going to come just to Israel. It's not going to come just to our people because that's too little a thing. It's too little a thing because his salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.

We see this theme start to present itself in the prophets, and it carries forward when we get to the New Testament. We look at the very end of the gospel of Matthew where Jesus' words say, "Go unto all the nations. Teach. Baptize. Go to all the nations." And when we get to Luke 10, our passage today, Jesus sent out seventy. Now, the symbolism is overwhelmingly significant. Seventy is the number of nations. It's understood that there were seventy nations in scripture and so, when Jesus appoints seventy it's very symbolic in saying that we are to go to all the nations.

We are to be a people who bring the good news to all the nations and when we get to Acts, I always find it wonderful that the very first ordained people are the deacons. It's so interesting to me that in the sixth chapter of the books of Acts, every single ordained person has a Greek name. When we get to the Apostle Paul we see that even more fully laid out when Paul said to the Galatians, "In Christ there is neither slave nor free, male nor female, Greek nor Jew."

You see, for us it's very clear that we don't exist as a people for the benefit of the world but as ambassadors of the one family of God. Now, let's be really clear what that means. We don't exist as a people for the benefit of the world but we exist as ambassadors of the one true family of God. It's not about us just doing our Christian thing amongst us Christians and helping others, it's about us welcoming everyone into the one family of the creator God.

So, when you look at Jesus you start to realize that there is this huge counter cultural initiative. You see, for Jesus it has to be counter cultural because our faith has to take us to other cultures. If it doesn't, it's not the faith of Christ. It's not about me and my people. It is about God's world and God's creation and all people. Now, this is why it's so important. Not simply because it is a moral call for us to go or a mandate or edict for us to go and share the good news, to see that there are five billion people who are missing on the team. Five billion people on the face of this earth that haven't heard or understood the good news of grace and forgiveness, salvation, hope and promise, the thing that is a foundation of all that we believe.

But you see we go not simply because we are called to go, but if we don't take our faith to other cultures we'll always be held captive by our own culture. Our God will increasingly get smaller as a result. You see, if we don't put ourselves in the context of other cultures, we'll confuse our culture, even our religious culture, our worship environment, our own way of thinking about things – we'll confuse

that with the true gospel. Increasingly, our God will get smaller and smaller and smaller. Are we together in this? This is something that is so important for us to realize.

Now, here's the danger of mercy ministries. I'm going to beat myself up, right? If you know me, you know I'm all about mercy ministries. However you want to define it, I'm about helping people. That's one of the things that I feel that Christ has instilled in me, that no one should go without. We should be out there in the world helping and caring and providing.

Some of the things that we do are just amazing. Think about a congregation that opens and operates a children's home in a foreign land. Think about the four thousand HIV positive patients that we have in Kenya and what's being provided through the mercy ministries. Think about Living Waters and the water installations for pure water around the world in which we've been involved. Think about the ministries that we do in Nicaragua. Think about the ministries that we will be doing in Mexico and in our own nation. All this kind of mercy ministry is so important to us but the danger of mercy ministries is that it's easy to be condescending.

"I have something that I'm going to give you. You're poor and you need money, I'll help you. You have dirty water; I'll help you get clean water. I'll give you.... I'll give you.... I'll give you...."

What does that do? That puts me up over you. The risk with this is that it starts to make my tribe a tribe just of prosperity. If we go to Africa, or Mexico, or Nicaragua, to Park Place, to the inner cities and other places and so many other people say, "Yeah, you're doing great stuff because you have all that money and ability. We're grateful for the tiny portion we get and we love it. You're doing all that for us." But ultimately that only hurts us and them. Eventually, they start to look at it and say, "Well, what I really need to be doing is not

thinking about the heart that is behind this and what's drawing these folks to do this, but I just need to be praying that God gives me that money."

So, it starts to become about prosperity and where in the world has money ever saved anyone? This is the danger that we have. We start to be condescending. "I bring solutions, fixes; I do all these things to help people and look how important I am. Look how much I help." All this plays out in our lives so what's the answer? Here it is: the first is that we have to admit our tribalism. We have to admit we are in a tribe. We might even want to put it this way-- we have to admit our races. Isn't it, hopefully, that something good for our nation will come out of the discussion of a youth murdered in Florida? Isn't it that, hopefully, some good will come out of great pain and suffering? But we have to admit our tribalism. And I have to admit that I'm in a tribe. I have to admit I'm in a tribe that is called American. I'm in a tribe called Christian. I'm in a tribe called Presbyterian. I have to admit that I'm in a tribe that is called upper middle class. I have to admit that in some way. If I don't recognize that, I'll always confuse the gospel.

First of all, I just have to admit it and the second is that if I'm going to be in a relationship with someone else, and I'm called to be in a relationship with someone else of another culture, here's what I have to do: I have to listen to another story. I have to listen. It's one of the great advantages of being an introvert. I really mean that. We get beat up a lot for being introverts because there is a lot that we don't do right, but one of the advantages of being an introvert is that I don't have to talk. I actually enjoy not talking when I'm in relationship with someone and I've come to realize that listening is really the key. Not listening in the sense that I'm getting ready to speak, like I'm waiting for an entry. Or when I'm talking to someone who isn't a believer who's never heard of Christ and I want to say, "I'll get the conversation going and then jump in with Jesus! Or me!"

I want to go back to the Bible, to the book of Job. Let's remember Job did have good friends for one week. Those friends came to him and the Bible says that for seven days and seven nights they didn't open their mouths and they were great friends. It was when they started talking that they became far less than great. We need to listen to another story and we need to truly listen. This is one thing that I can tell you about my experience with Muslims. I really believe this. My experience and my conversation with Muslims is that, generally, Muslims have an understanding of trusting in God in ways that we, as Christians, could really learn. Now that doesn't mean that I don't recognize huge distinctions - Christ is my Lord and Savior, don't confuse that - but even in that, I think I can learn something if I truly sit down and listen. We need to listen for another story, to be in context long enough and deeply enough to truly listen to their story.

Friday night we had a men's gathering here in First Hall. It was really well done. Jim Gates did most of the teaching and that was great. We had some responses from folks. It was wonderful. One of the things that happened that was so interesting to me was that a guy named Rob Goodrum, who has been a good friend of mine for most of the time that I've been here in Norfolk and has come to Shoulder to Shoulder often, contacted the men's ministry folks and said he was working with urban ministry. He said he had some young men that he would like to bring to the men's banquet. Of course, they worked it out and Rob came with twelve to fifteen young urban men. We know what that means - African American kids from Maury, Granby, Booker T., Lake Taylor, and a couple from TCC.

Now, here's what was so cool. You could play it two ways. You could say, "These kids must feel awkward here with these old guys, other than Gates and a few others, so let's let them hang together." But they didn't do that. They took those kids and divided them into all the tables. Two of those kids went to almost all of the tables. Wow. Now,

here's what was so amazing about it: that night the topic was "Who is someone that has mentored you in your life or where are the real friends in your life?" We talked about that around our table and what an amazing privilege it was, not for them but for us, to be able to be with these young men and, perhaps, hear and have them hear us be at a place where we're simply sharing our stories.

I find it when I'm in the woods, in the forest in Africa with the tribe that's adopted me as an elder. When I go with them I don't understand a single word they say. It's a language I don't understand. I'm with the old men, many of them in their nineties and I sit in their inner circle. They see my white hair and they think I'm that old and they put me in there and I always go and it's a wonderful thing. I've come to realize that just sitting with them for hours in the forest, day after day often, we forget that we don't share the same mother tongue because the Father's language of just being together is communicated. So we have to be able to listen to someone's story and then when our turn comes (and this is the key to the whole thing) we have to learn from Isaiah that we should always speak from our weakness. We always speak from our vulnerability.

I am sick and tired of Christians saying, "God blessed me. God blessed me. God blessed me. Look at all that God's given me. Look at all that he's done. I honor him. I glorify him because of all that he's done." What about those places when you felt that it was so dark you didn't know whether the sun would ever shine again? What about those places where you were oppressed? What about those places where it looked as if your own identity as a people would never return? Those places where you've been in Babylon? Where was God in that? That's the place that the world needs to hear about. They don't need to hear about the blessings that come, primarily, by monetary success. But you see, we as a people of God have this amazing privilege to come from our weakness because that's who Jesus Christ is. He comes as the suffering servant. The one thing that

I'm learning in my life is that I should never fear failure because failure in my life, to this point, has always led me closer to Christ. Because without Christ, I'm lost. People often say, "How do you have that introductory conversation about life and how do you get into the conversation of faith?"

I think it's easy. You just ask somebody their story and they start talking and they love being listened to. Somewhere along the way they'll say, "What about you? How did you get to do this? How have you accomplished this?"

I always say, "It was Jesus." I am so much a sinner. I'm in so much trouble, it's only by Christ. What does that mean? Well, then you can start the conversation, "You see without Christ, we're lost and the truth is, the weaker you are, the stronger your witness." Remember that. The weaker you are, the stronger your witness.

I have a dear friend who's been struggling with a significant depression for a good while now. She's in the kind of profession that leads her to feel that if she let people know about it, she might lose her job or people wouldn't respect her any longer. She's in one of those professions where you have to seem like you have it all together, or appear that you think you do. So, she hid it and if you've ever been in those kinds of seasons of life, if you've struggled with depression like I have, you learn how to fake it for a while-- the right smiles at the right times-- but the time came when you couldn't fake it anymore.

So, she finally decided that she would be vulnerable, and she would share with a group of people what she was going through. Almost that very day, healing began slowly to enter into her life. Almost that very day, the opportunity for new relationships, for a new respect, for a new appreciation, for a new value entered into her life. What a glorious and beautiful thing to see these relationships start to grow

and people starting to contact her and offer help and prayers. People who are able to come and say, "You're one of us. You're one of the vulnerable ones."

You see, here's the thing: vulnerability is the key. The courage to be imperfect is the birthplace of creativity. The courage to be imperfect is the birthplace of the gift of the Spirit in this world. It's what we have to offer that no other faith does. A religion based on law can never be imperfect. A religion that is based on law is only about law, it's only about following it, and ultimately, it's only about being a moral person. What about those of us in this world who know that as much as we try there's still something else in there? What is it for us? It's about a Savior. It's about a hope. It's about a promise. The thing that we know that we recognize is that the weaker we are, the stronger our witness.

I'll never forget, not too many years ago, I was at a deep, dark place. I couldn't sleep and I'd go through cycles of not being able to sleep. I wandered around the house one night. I found myself wandering outside and made my way to the deck in the backyard. I looked up and the sky was just filled with stars and I thought, "I can't even appreciate the beauty." And all of a sudden God simply said to me, through his Word, "Look at the stars; can you count them?"

We have to witness to five billion people on the face of this earth who don't know that there's a glory of God that can offer forgiveness and grace and hope and promise. We're the people that are the hands and the feet, the body of Christ. So, my tribe, I haven't decided about the Colts yet but I know my real tribe. I'm never going to weigh in between North Carolina and Duke.

But, my tribe is a group of sinners, posers and losers; you and me who without the grace of Christ would be lost. With him, all things are possible and I want the world to know it. I want the witness of

our lives to be a witness that shares that in love. The only way that is going to happen is to get outside our culture. The only way it's going to happen is for us to step out and enter into a conversation, admit that we're tribal and enter into the story of another so that when the time comes our weakness can be the proclamation to the world.