

# "Because I AM...You Are"

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Independence, MO  
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**NEW TESTAMENT LESSON - Romans 15:4-13**  
**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - Isaiah 42:5-9**

Bob Hulteen, writing in *Sojourners* magazine<sup>1</sup>, says that “within the Christian tradition, rarely is a concept more misunderstood than prophecy. Unfortunately, this misinterpretation wreaks havoc on our society in the form of doomsday soothsayers, apocalyptic dreamers and militant revolutionaries.

The crux of the misunderstanding is this: Prophecy *is not* the result of seeing into the future. Instead, prophecy is the faithful declaration of the implications of current actions *on* the future, with the hope of having an impact on both. For instance,” says Hulteen, “one need not be a rocket scientist to figure out that increasing economic inequities lead to social dissolution and fragmentation. So someone with the courage to say that wealth accumulation leads to the destruction of community, and that the result will be a future awash in violence, isn't looking into a crystal ball. They're simply sensitive to inevitabilities.” Such prophets as Hulteen describes become beacons of hope in an uncertain world.

The scripture we heard from the Old Testament today was written by the Prophet Isaiah more than 2,500 years ago, and more than 500 years before Jesus walked the earth. With the Israelites held captive in Babylonian exile, Isaiah writes of a future in which they are held in the palm of God's hand, brought forth from captivity and kept safe to become a light unto the nations, a light that opens the eyes of those blind to God's truth.

A year after Isaiah wrote of such hope, the king of Persia defeated Babylon and freed the exiles. Israel was free to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, and the rest, as they say, is history. Today, we claim our identity as God's people; the spiritual descendants of Israel sent to shine light unto all the world. But how do we actually do that?

By embarking on a Lenten journey alongside the prophets of old, we are invited to know God more deeply, to experience Christ more fully, and to live life more freely; free to speak and act with the hope of having an impact on both the world today and on its future. And to do that we need to draw closer to God; deepen our understanding of whom God is and who we are as God's children. Scholars disagree on whether the prophets actually *foretold* of Christ, but it is clear that their writings help us understand who Christ is and who we are as God's children in Christ. You can't use the Bible to scientifically *prove* anything about God. But everything in the Bible is useful in deepening our faith. Our reading from Isaiah tells us three things about God. It tells us 1) that God is sovereign, supreme, almighty. It tells us 2) that God is

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<sup>1</sup> "Once a Millennium," *Sojourners*, July-August 1998, 65.

relational, active in our lives and in our world. And Isaiah tells us also that God is prophetic, able to declare what will be before it is, to speak into the future.

The future God speaks into is the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. During the 40 days of Lent, many Christians give up something in order to draw closer to God, or we may take on something new for the same purpose. We seek to set ourselves free from the bondage of whatever captivity we find ourselves in – eating too much of the wrong things, or spending too little time in prayer or study. Or conversely, we may bind ourselves to new practices that serve others – taking a break from movies or eating out and giving the savings to the needy, or dedicating more free time to serving others or maybe seeking out an additional opportunity to worship and commune with God. Any such activity prayerfully undertaken brings us closer to God. What might you do to draw closer to God?

Somewhere in eastern Oklahoma is an interesting billboard. Driving across the plains, you can see its huge letters from afar: “JESUS SAVES.” Drive a little closer, and you can make out some additional, somewhat smaller words: “JESUS SAVES. He sets the captives free.” It’s only when you’re right up close that you can read the full message, including the final line of small print: “JESUS SAVES. He sets the captives free. Joe Bob Bail Bondsman” (followed of course by Joe Bob’s phone number).

Freedom takes on a whole new meaning when we draw closer to Jesus. What can we expect to experience by drawing closer to Christ; drawing closer to God during Lent?

By giving up something for Lent – for God – or taking on something new, we come to know the sovereignty of God. Isaiah, when he’s speaking to those held captive in Babylon – and to us held captive by self-interest, self-preservation, misguided ways, or wrong-headed thinking – when Isaiah speaks to the Israelites and to us he declares:

“Thus says God, the Lord, *who* created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it I am the Lord ....”

The first thing we learn – both through our reading and through our faithful practices – is that God is sovereign. God’s declaration that “I AM” – declared both here through the prophet Isaiah and much earlier through Moses – this declaration is heard more acutely by us when we step out of our usual practices and places and into holy practices and sacred spaces.

Like the prophet Isaiah who spoke into a future of freedom where there was no freedom, we are invited to speak into God’s supremacy in our lives when all around us we’re surrounded by our own wants and desires. Lent gives us the opportunity to move away from what we want all the time and to move one step closer to God.

When we step closer to God, what do we find? The second thing we learn through today’s scripture, and through our Lenten practices, is that God is relational. In Isaiah, we read: “I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you, I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from prison, those who sit in darkness.”

God is relational, and this means that we get something when we draw closer to God. Drawing closer to God is as much about whom we are as God's children as it is about who God is as sovereign overall creation.

There are several promises in drawing closer to God. Through the prophet Isaiah, it's as if God is saying, "Because I AM ... you are." Because God is sovereign, you – we – are freed for righteousness, freed to act according to God's call upon our lives, freed in the knowledge that God holds us and keeps us secure.

The same God who accompanied the Israelites into Babylon is the same God who delivered them from captivity and returned them to Jerusalem. And just as the Israelites relied on God's promise that *they* would be light in a world of darkness, we today rely on the fullness of that promise in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we *are* able to shine the light of God's truth into the darkest recesses of our world – weather that darkness is personal, familial, or global.

If you're struggling to deal with illness, addiction, unemployment, overload, or any number of temptations, drawing closer to God in prayer, study and meditation; fasting from food, drink or behaviors; selflessly giving of your time or money – these things can free us from our personal and societal demons. And as we are set free, the circle of freedom expands to those around us – to our families, our communities, our country, even our planet. Lent is an opportunity to be set free from what binds you.

Most people know Rosa Parks as the woman who refused to go to the back of the bus. One day Rosa Parks decided she would no longer be held captive by racial discrimination, and the next day thousands of paying customers refused to ride those same buses until something was done about it. It took over a year, but one day in December 1956, something was done about it: the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed segregated buses.

It took just one woman doing what she knew was right – refusing to be held captive by what she knew was wrong – to propel the civil rights movement across this country and around the world. Some might argue that Rosa Parks was a prophet, speaking into a future that only she and a select few could see was possible. She gave up her freedom, was bodily thrown into jail that she might be spiritually liberated from that which had gained an ungodly power over her life.

The Israelites came to understand *their* physical captivity in terms of their *spiritual* liberation; believing that God allowed them to be taken captive physically because they had neglected God spiritually. The Israelites had placed other beliefs and practices above God Almighty and allowed idolatry to rule their lives.

Into this mindset, Isaiah speaks these words: "I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them."

The third thing we learn in our Lenten practices, which we also read in scripture, is that God is prophetic. God's declarations, whether through the Bible, through the people God puts in our lives, even through – sometimes especially through those who are oppressed and marginalized

like Rosa Parks – God’s declarations speak into a future of possibilities, if we but listen for God’s word to us.

As you journey through this Lenten season, I invite you to listen for God speaking in your life. This is your chance to enter into a deeper relationship with God – remembering God’s promise to hold you and keep you secure. And then place God as sovereign in one or more areas of your life, either in what you give up or what you take on. And as we draw closer to God, trusting solely in God and listening for God’s word, join me in waiting in anticipation of that new thing God is even now doing in your life – in my life – and throughout the world.

## PASTORAL PRAYER:

God in whom the heart's deep troubles are eased and who can sooth the furrowed brow, hear our prayers for all whose darkest night still lies before them.

No more than Christ are we exempt from deepest distress; no less than he are we granted the deep delight of your presence. Let darkness yield, O God, to your great morning light.

Hold tenderly in your arms all who are weary, embattled and shattered. Though their strength is spent, fill them even now with your Spirit.

Restore them, as surely as Christ rose from the tomb into everlasting light. <sup>[1]</sup>

And help us, O God, to hear your call to times of rest and reflection, that we might be refreshed and enlivened to do your work, in and for the world.

Bring us to discover the gifts you've imparted to us, that we might share them with others; and make us thankful for the gifts others give us by giving of themselves.

Loving God, we offer these prayers joining our voices to the great chorus of those who sing your praise and depend on you alone. We long for that day when all your children will live in your peace and praise your name.

Until that day comes, give us sturdy patience and enduring hope, rooted only in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.