



A Preacher's Conversation with Second Isaiah

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That favorite device of fantasy writers, the “warp in the space-time continuum,” has brought the author of Isaiah 40-55 into conversation with a late twentieth-century preacher. We listen in.

Preacher: Well, my Old Testament teachers would never forgive me if I didn't start with the critical question, so how about it? Is there a Second Isaiah? I mean, if you don't exist, I suppose we might as well stop this conversation right here.

Second Isaiah: Hey, gimme a break. You want me to develop an identity crisis? Actually, I never ran around asking: Who am I? Existential *Angst* really wasn't my thing. Who is God, on the other hand—now that's something I cared about. And wondered about a lot!

P: Do you mean to say personal identity doesn't matter to you?

SI: No, not at all; though, I must admit, we were pretty far from your issues of individual expression and individual rights. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, I'm not sure; but you have come a long way! Yet, of course, personal identity matters. In fact, when our public world fell apart (Jerusalem gone, temple gone, king gone, land gone, covenant gone!), God's talk to us got mighty personal. You are the offspring of Abraham, my friend, he said; I have called you by name, you are mine. “I love you,” he said. How's that for personal? Yet, it was never private. The call came to each of us and to all of us—equally personally. It was

being addressed by God that way that gave us a new identity when we no longer had any idea who we were.

P: You're saying times were tough. Worse than now?

SI: I don't know about that. We sure were disestablished, though—real quick. And it was hard to figure out what that would mean. It was God, after all, who had told us about being tied to the land and to a particular hill and to the line of David. Now that those things were gone, what would it look like to be God's people? What would we gather around? We didn't think—or at least I didn't think—God had simply thrown away his promises, but everything was different now. We knew that much, but we hardly expected what God would prescribe.

P: Which was?

SI: Amnesia. Forget all that old stuff, he said. I'm doing a new thing. Amnesia! For heaven's sake, everything we did was about memory. We told stories, we wrote history, we recited creeds, we reenacted great events, we set up piles of stones, we taught the kids. History people, memory people—that's who we were (check your encyclopedias!). And now the word of

the Lord said to forget! How? What would be left?

P: Not much, it seems. On the other hand, there wasn't much left to lose, was there? With all the institutions gone, it must have been a surprise to hear God's voice at all. I wonder about the same kind of things now. The designated labelers are calling this the post-Christian era. What they mean is there's virtually no cultural support left for the church or the Christian tradition—our *de jure* disestablishment has finally become *de facto*. Some would say that means God is dead, too.

SI: Yahweh is dead! Long live Marduk!

P: Huh?

SI: Many of our folks thought the same thing: Babylon won, so Marduk won. Why not go with the winner?

P: Except, if your book is right, God refused to fold up and go away. He kept talking.

SI: Wouldn't quit! He talked meaning right back into us.

P: So maybe what was left, when nothing else was left, was God.

SI: No fair! You read the book! But, I guess you're right. No sooner had I gotten over telling everybody to forget the old stuff (I mean, the *exodus*, for God's sake!), than I had to go back and say: Remember it all. And why? Not because we were supposed to hold on to it—that's what the forgetting part was about. The old stuff wasn't going to work any more, and I guess we had to get that straight. But we had to remember it, because we had to remember who had done it. Everything had changed, but God was still God.

P: So far so good, but was God still God when Nebuchadnezzar was burning the city and raping the women and hanging leaders in the public square?

SI: At least you get the questions right! But, what you question was, in fact, what Jeremiah preached, you know—that all this was God's work. That had also

been the sermon of my alter-ego a couple hundred years earlier; except, of course, old Isaiah was talking about Assyria—but the idea was the same. (Would either of these guys make it through your call process?)

P: Did you actually believe that? *Could* you believe it? That God was responsible for all those horrors?

SI: I'm not sure I'm up to this conversation, but the problem is: If you really believe the *Shema*, that God is one, what else are you going to say? If there really is only one power in heaven, and if that power really is directed toward the human species, then it seems you've got to say that that power has something to do with what happens.

P: Next you'll be telling me God did Auschwitz, too.

SI: Wait, I'm not at all prepared to say that. See, I'm out of my depth here. The thing about a prophet is, we only talked when we had something to say. (Not altogether a bad idea, wouldn't you agree?) We never pretended to know everything about everything. We knew what God wanted us to know, and that's what we talked about (at least, when we got it right; some of our guys blew it too, of course, which is why you don't have a book of Hananiah to preach from). But God *told* us things about what he was doing with Babylon; as far as I know, there's been no clear word about Auschwitz. I sure don't have one.

P: But didn't I hear you saying that if it happened, God did it? Is that right?

SI: No! A minute ago, when I was talking about the possible side-effects of radical monotheism, I suppose what I was doing was theology. You probably do it now and again, too; if you believe in God and have a brain, it's hard to avoid. But theology is one thing, prophecy's another. What God said was, Yes, I am using Babylon as a tool of judgment. And that made a certain terrible sense to us. Babylon was God's judgment on our sin. But would you try to make that case for Auschwitz? It would be monstrous. Besides, even in our day, God drew limits. "Babylon," he said, "you enjoyed it too much. My people's actions brought consequences—terrible consequences—which you were given to deliver; but you went far beyond those consequences, by a factor of two at least. No mother should be forced to boil her children!" There may be only one power *in heaven*, but there is other power. Babylon had real power. So do you. So does your U.S.A. or your ELCA or your congregation or whatever. And though there may well be prime directives about what to do with that power, what if you don't get it right? Babylon refused to get it right, and God had to deal with that. That's what God said, anyway; so that's what I said.

P: So, what you're saying is you were essentially a pre-technological dictating machine?

SI: A messenger maybe. Not a dictating machine. Not to brag, but I got straight A's in poetry all through school. One of my old teachers made me memorize psalms till they came out of my ears, and I was among the inventors of what one of your guys called "*Traditionsgeschichte*." So obviously what I said came out differently than it would have if someone else had said it—even though we were

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working with the same stuff. Maybe you could call me a translator. If your friend Martin Luther thought it was a tough job to make us prophets speak German, he ought to have tried putting "Yahwese" into Hebrew!

P: Your reference to Yahweh brings me back to the beginning of our conversation. You said you cared a lot about who God was. Didn't you know? You wrote the Bible, for heaven's sake!

SI: Did I know who God was? Yes and no, I suppose. As I said, I knew the *Shema*; I even believed it! I knew about Zion and exodus and promises and steadfast love. But if God really was doing something new, what did that mean about God? He kept redefining himself: "I am Yahweh, your Holy one, the Creator of Israel, your King"; "I am the first, and I am the last"; "I am Yahweh, and there is no other"; "I am He" (whatever that meant).

P: Sounds strong at least.

SI: No doubt! And, of course, that was all tied up with his use of Cyrus to bring down Babylon. If somebody's going to mess around in history like that, it takes strength. And God knows, that was good news for us. Folks in your day and age have a bit of a problem with thinking about God as a mighty warrior—an image we used a lot. But I presume the people in Auschwitz were glad when somebody showed up at the door with tanks, not just petitions and prayers—and so were we. Somebody had to break the iron bars! And God promised somebody would. Everything that had been closed in would be opened up.

P: Now there's an image I could use. Virtually all of my parishioners are tied up in knots about something or other. They're closed in on themselves, they're trapped in despair, they're dug into relationships they can't or won't heal, they're immobilized by anxiety, they're in

bondage to greed. Do you suppose I can use your stuff? Is that what you were talking about, or does it spiritualize things too much?

SI: I think what you want to do with what I said is probably OK—but be cautious. Fact is, we already knew how to spiritualize old words, so you're not asking to do anything new. (How about circumcising the foreskin of your heart for an example?) But the caution is: don't tame my words. Don't steal them for the church and deny them to the world. Does God want to open up people's personal lives and hearts. No doubt! But that can't ever mean God has given up on the world. God wants political freedom, too. He doesn't abide prisons well, or tyrants. And he won't let go of the world. It may be poetry to say that myrtle will replace thorns, but there's great truth in that poetry. God means to heal the world, to heal everything. It seems to be in his job description!

P: God as superman, then? Is that the picture you see when you close your eyes?

SI: Well, not exactly. The trouble is, I kept getting mixed messages. All that macho stuff was surely there, but so were other things. Was God like a man of war? Yes—but also like a woman in labor or a nursing mother. Would God use his arm to break the tyranny of Babylon? Of course—but also to gather lambs. Did God

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extinguish pharaoh's soldiers like a wick? Yes—but he might not do it again. Could God trade nations like, pardon the expression, pork-bellies on the commodities market? You bet—but he generally relied on words. Was God involved in stretching out the heavens and spreading out the earth? Yes—but also in the suffering of his servant.

P: And who was that servant?

SI: Oh dear! Not you too! If I had one thing to do over again . . .

P: It sounds like you're saying the suffering servant theme was not so much directed to some future time as it was related to your whole picture of God.

SI: Right. I suppose, if that's true, it would describe what God might do in what was for me future as well, but God kept calling us servant in my day, too—each of us and all of us were God's servants insofar as we were faithful.

P: And what did that mean?

SI: Well, at least that God was with us, that God had chosen us and mothered us, that we were securely God's. But also that he had something for us to do: we were supposed to make everyone see what kind of God this was, to give ourselves to others.

P: Sounds risky.

SI: No doubt. Being chosen isn't always good news. It's also a call to suffering and martyrdom. And, strangely, God might be able to get more done through that "weakness" than through his awesome power. God seems to be that kind of God.

P: Paradox again! So, is there any rhyme or reason to this God?

SI: I think so. The God I knew was hardly chaotic. But, hey, I'm a poet, not a systematician; so don't ask of me more than I can deliver. At any rate, the contradictory pictures just kept coming back in different forms: God of strength, God of compassion; male warrior, nursing mother; soldier, shepherd; God in victory, God in suffering; Lord of Israel, light to the nations. Finally, I figured out it was not a multiple choice test ("Pick the best answer"); it was a complex and crazy quilt, and my job was to describe it. Poetry was the only thing that would do.

P: You sound like the Al Gore of your generation, except that instead of “reinventing government,” you were reinventing God.

SI: I think I’d rather say that God keeps reinventing himself! That may be what “steadfast love” means: commitment to covenant no matter what. It may be what you talk about as incarnation.

P: Which, of course, leads me to another question people around here would want me to ask: If you’re a prophet with all these different pictures of God, what do you think of Jesus of Nazareth?

SI: Ouch! You’re putting me on the spot. I mean, I was called to speak to Israel, and I still do speak to Israel, and now you want me to jump ship. Of course, as I understand it, I speak now to the church as well—or, to be a bit more precise, God speaks to the church through my words as interpreted by present preachers. And maybe that’s the point: It’s not fair, not possible, to ask me to do your job for

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you. The question really isn’t: What do *I* think of Jesus of Nazareth. The question is: Having read the law and the prophets, what do *you* think of Jesus of Nazareth? I made my confession, now it’s time for you to make yours. I guess the only thing I would say is this: You’ve seen my word pictures of God—if the paradox fits, wear it!

P: So, if you’re not going to talk about Jesus, I suppose I’m not going to get anywhere asking you about abortion or homosexuality or ecology either?

SI: What’s abortion? What’s homosexuality? What’s ecology?

P: As I feared.

SI: I’m exaggerating to make a point, of course: preachers are fundamentally contextual. I was, and you have to be too. Your questions are not the same as mine; your ways of thinking about the world are not the same as mine; and, as somebody once said, none of our ways are God’s ways—so communication gets hard. It’s not that I think my confession is irrelevant to your world; I don’t. I even think my confession is true, so I hope you’ll listen to it. But, still, you’ll have to make your own. I can’t take you off the hook for that one.

P: Do you mean you have nothing to say directly to the modern world?

SI: Not exactly. Since you’ve read my book you know I thought about words (or word) a lot. In fact, as I’ve come to realize since being wrenched into this time zone, if I didn’t exist, you preachers and theologians who talk so much about the word of God would have to invent me! Words are strong and weak at the same time—thoroughly and wonderfully human. What an amazing thing—what an incarnational thing—that words are the primary way God should choose to make himself known. But he does, so the fact is, once God’s word is spoken, it’s out there doing its thing—like the rain or snow. Jerusalem may go up in smoke, Babylon may fall (and Los Angeles may self-destruct), but God’s word stays. That’s still true, I think. So what God said through me *does* speak to your world. I may be long since dead—and there’s still a cadre of folks out there who will never believe I existed—but God’s word (through my words) is alive and well and living in your Bible! Take and read! Better: Take and preach! Then that word will live not only in the Bible but in the hearts and minds of you and your people.

P: Now you’re making it hard on us. You’re asking us to take a stand, actually to say something, rather than merely providing religious Muzak to soothe people’s budding spirituality.

SI: Bingo! (Hey, how do you like my use of your cross-cultural liturgical slang?)

P: But did you take your own advice? I mean, it took guts for Nathan to say to the king, “Thou art the man!” or for Amos to tell people God hates their worship, but you could run for office hollering “The doors are open!”—which seems to be all you ever cared about.

SI: Touché! Of course, what choice did I have? You gotta say what you gotta say. Still, I’m not sure you understand yet. When I said the doors were open, in fact

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they weren’t. Most of our people thought I was crazy, and the Babylonians thought I was subversive. But God said, Watch! His word was doing incredible things, he said—new things, creative things, things that had never been heard before, things that even unbelievers couldn’t overlook. That wasn’t religious smoke or pie-in-the-sky. And things *did* happen. Eyes and ears opened even as I spoke! (Or even as God spoke through me.) Even as they heard the word. And another thing: Of course, it’s good news to say “The door is open!” but it’s an invitation, too. It challenges people to go through that door, to shake off the old restraints, to embrace the new. No easy thing, that. Human beings are an amazingly adaptable species. Even in prison they can get so comfortable that an open door becomes a threat, the fresh air blowing through it so heady, people cower in the corners to rebreathe the stale stuff they’ve breathed before. They’ll do most anything to hide from the new and holy gusts. People get upset when you shake up their world view. They’ll spit on you and pull your hair. I found that out!

P: The more you talk, the less comforting your message sounds. But wasn’t comfort supposed to be your refrain?

SI: Right, but what is comfort? The thing is, real comfort knocks the props out from under false comforts. Is a couch potato comfortable? (You guys have some great expressions!) Or somebody who knows pretty well where the next house payment is coming from? Or who has found mystery and meaning in crystals or cryogenics? They’d probably say so. But what if they hear about real comfort, comfort whose only prop is *the* prop, comfort that sets people free? Everybody wants freedom on paper, but what about real freedom? With no pillar of fire to

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follow, how does a free person navigate on an ocean with unseen horizons? It was my joy to point to the fire—even when I got burned.

P: Wow! Still and all, is there a Sunday sermon in all this? That’s the least I expected from talking to a prophet. The thing is, people are so apathetic. What am I going to say to get them moving? To make a difference amid their broken families and collapsing cities and galloping greed? What should I say?

SI: What can I tell you? You know what I heard: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” I’d still give it a shot, I guess. Try the gospel. It sure did surprising things the first time around.

P: And, for the record, just what is the gospel?

SI: I would say it is God’s work of liberation, what we called redemption. When God comes to save and transform the world—beginning with me and you—that’s good news. The prophet’s job, or the preacher’s, is to see it, wherever it happens, and to name it.

P: So, the gospel is more than what people would normally think of as church stuff?

SI: Certainly. God is God of the world, not merely of the church. Of course, he's there in the church with his word and signs, transforming everything in sight. So, of course, invite people into this circle of the friends of Abraham and Sarah where they will also become friends of God. But the church can't keep God inside its walls, and it wouldn't want to. We'd like to see God setting people free everywhere, redeeming the creation everywhere.

P: And how do people see that?

SI: Hey, that's your job—or your privilege—to point to how and where God happens, to call people to be participants in the process. It will take all your creativity and all your courage to get it right, all your poetry and all your prowess to get a hearing. But, give it a shot! You might be amazed to find out what God can do through people he has set free. And so might they!

FREDERICK J. GAISER has taught Isaiah for 20 years. Here he tries a different way of presenting the themes and theology of Isaiah 40-55.