

What Should Have Been

On Sunday, we began a new sermon series in which we'll take several Bible passages where God spoke through a prophet to the Israelites and apply those prophecies as if God were speaking directly to us through them – because God is! We began with Isaiah 43:14-21.

1. Warm up question. Fortune cookies remind us how much we long for prophetic guidance in our lives. Do you ever find yourself secretly hoping God will speak to you through a fortune cookie? What's the best or worst fortune you ever got?
2. Before we jump into today's Scripture, we need to understand its context. As best we can tell, Isaiah 43 was written sometime around 550 B.C. at a low point in Israel's history. The glory days of Kings David and Solomon were gone, followed by a long period of decline that eventually led to a civil war that split the nation between north and south. Not long after, the north was conquered by the Assyrians, then the south was conquered by the Babylonians. The Babylonians uprooted many Israelites and forcibly moved them to Babylon. It was then that God raised up a "Second Isaiah" – a prophet whose ministry picked up where the original Isaiah's had left off – to speak God's word to Israel in exile.
 - a. The Israelites had long believed they were a "chosen people" with a special mission to share God's light and to bless the earth (Genesis 12:1-3). But now their nation no longer existed; they had lost everything. From the perspective of exile, what kinds of doubts or questions might they have been wrestling with?
 - b. We all would like to believe that we are special, chosen of God to do important things in life. When we were younger, we all had dreams about how life would go for us – like Roseanne Connor's dream of becoming a writer. What are some dreams you had that haven't worked out like you hoped?
 - c. Jeff reminded us of the story of Rich Dennis when he was hit by a car, spent months in hospitals and rehab centers, and had to give up his job and home, enduring multiple reconstructive surgeries. In one of their conversations, Jeff asked Rich how all this affected his faith. Rich said that, in the abstract, he always knew he wasn't exempt from tragedy in life. Yet on another level, Rich said, he had always believed that he was special to God, a beloved child that God would look after. So when tragedy struck, all his assumptions were tossed up in the air. Suppose you were to experience a great tragedy, how might that affect your assumptions about how God feels about you and how God does (or doesn't) work in your life?
3. As noted above, God sent Second Isaiah to deliver a special message to Israel in their time of devastation and disappointment. Jeff identified three key truths embedded in the words of Second Isaiah (recorded in Isaiah 43:14-21) that can guide us through similar times in our life. The first key truth is: ***You are still special to God; God is still right there with you.***

- a. Read Isaiah 43:14-15. The emphasis in these verses is on God's special relationship and empathetic connection with Israel – your Redeemer, your Holy One, your King, your Creator. Do you feel that God and you have a special relationship and empathetic connection? Is this a good way to think? Why or why not?
- b. In times of great trouble, what enables you to keep believing that God is right there with you in deep empathetic connection? What keeps you from becoming a cynic?
4. Now read Isaiah 43:16-18. From verse 18, Jeff drew the second key truth to guide us through devastation and disappointment: ***Your future will not be found in the past, so let go of the past.***
 - a. How might Israel's glorious past have been a source of hope to them when they were in exile? How might it also have been a hindrance?
 - b. Jeff shared Leonard Sweet's parable about an old man who experienced triumph and tragedy – i.e., lost his horse, horse came back with 3 more, one of them severely injured his son, injury kept son from military conscription, so son survived, etc. With each tragedy, the townsfolk would say, "That's too bad." With each triumph they would say, "That's wonderful!" Each time the old man gave the same reply, "Too soon to tell." What are your thoughts about that parable? What life lessons should we draw from it?
 - c. Hindu guru Swami Rama was trained by a master who once offered Rama a memorable lesson. His master grabbed hold of a tree and screamed for Rama to pry him loose. Rama tried, but couldn't and dropped in exhaustion, whereupon the master laughed, then simply let go of the tree. What was the master trying to teach Rama? What life lessons should we draw from his example?
5. Now read Isaiah 43:19-21. From verse 19, Jeff drew the third truth to guide us through devastation and disappointment: ***God is about to do a new thing in your life.***

From time to time, as lobsters grow, they have to shed their shells, leaving them exposed and vulnerable, until a new shell forms. Shedding their shell must be terribly frightening for lobsters, yet if they didn't, their old shell would become a prison and eventually a casket.

- Where in your life might God be calling you to take the risk of shedding your shell (i.e., the comfortable/protective way things have been), so as to embrace something new?
- What holds you back? What do you most fear losing?
- What do you risk missing if you refuse to embrace change?
- Are you ready to take the leap?