

Fragmenting Gods

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[0 : 00] Our God and Father, as we turn to your word, we ask that your word might smash all our arrogance, blow up all our intellectualism, take away all our pride and self-sufficiency, and open our eyes to your glory. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

It's sad to note that on the last Sunday, David Short was here, the congregation was down to 47, and now he's gone, it's back up again.

Nobody would tell him that. I am reminded, though, how grateful we as a congregation need to be for David and Bronwyn, and how I long that you would love and support and encourage them and hold on to them, because of, I think, they're God's gift to us in a wonderful way.

And as you were to Fran and I when we came, and you became for us a healing and renewing community, and there's a kind of culmination in that, in that our oldest daughter and her husband, our oldest daughter Peggy and her husband Guy, begin in their own parish now in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, this morning.

So I feel very thankful this morning. But then there's the problem of Isaiah, which you have just heard Gene read to you, and I hope you followed carefully on page 636 of your pew Bible.

[2 : 04] So I wrestled with this passage for some time, and finally phoned Ruth and said, why did David pick this passage for this Sunday?

And Ruth said, he didn't, you did. And then I remembered that several months ago, trying to plan this Sunday, I looked up the lectionary and the prayer book, and this is a peculiar Sunday, because it's the second Sunday after Christmas, but it's not yet Epiphany.

And so there's a sort of, this lesson is squeezed in there for occasions in which such an anomaly might occur. So there we are, confronted with Isaiah chapter 41, verses 21 to 29.

And it's a wonderful passage. I've just been delighted with it once I sort of broke through a little bit. In it, Isaiah is speaking for the Lord, and he says, all right, we're going to set up a great courtroom. And maybe it would be more like a football field, only there will be a judge who will hear the evidence, and I want you to bring the evidence before him.

[3 : 32] So look what it says. Set forth your arguments. Present your cases. But how are you to do it? And then you look in chapter 41 and verse 22, and it says, bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen.

Now, when I went to university in the fall, they always had a homecoming weekend, and all the fraternity and different faculties would get a big hay wagon and a tractor, and they'd put up a big float representing what they stood for and what they believed in and so on, and they would parade these all down the street.

Well, that's what basically Isaiah is asking them to do. Get your idols, pick them up off their stands, and put them on a float, and get a couple of oxen, and bring them here, and let's hear from them. Hear what they have to say. And so, Isaiah calls on them to do that. And then he puts a series of questions to them that they are to answer, all these idols.

And in the questions, they are to tell us what former things were and what their outcome is. They were to tell us what's going to happen, to tell us what the flow of history is, and what history means, and where it's all going to.

[5 : 04] Get them to tell us. Give us the answer to those questions. And do they have any sense of history? And can they look with discernment at an event and say where it will lead so that the circumstances of today, we can see where they're going to bring us to by tomorrow.

And can they tell the future by understanding the past and have the absolute power of prediction so that when they say this is going to happen, then they have the authority to make it happen.

Let your God show us that this is what they can do. In fact, do anything, you know. Bring on a disaster, if you have to, to show your power. Or maybe you can bring on some great harvest or some sign of benefit that you can bring down on the people.

So these are the questions that the gods were asked to answer and to demonstrate their wisdom and to demonstrate their power and their authority. Well, as you will see from the text, the results were quite disappointing.

Verse 24, you see, it says, you are less than nothing. Your works are utterly worthless. And he who chooses to follow you is detestable or even despicable.

[6 : 32] And so one of the points that Isaiah makes about people is that they become like the God whom they worship. And when you get elderly like me, you, and you, some of you, you're beginning to look peculiar.

And it's because you're beginning to look like the God you worship, you know. And it's pretty apparent for other people to see, though you probably can't see it and I can't see it, but it really gets down to the heart of things.

And so he tells them that they are a failure. And then in verse 25, it says, but this is what the Lord says.

And the Lord, not through some idol which people worship, but the Lord speaks to them through his word by his prophet. And the prophet says, look in verse 25, I have stirred up one from the north and he's coming.

One from the rising sun who calls on my name. And he treads on rollers as if they were mortar. And as if they, it was a potter treading the clay.

[7 : 53] The mortar offers no resistance. The clay offers no resistance to the potter, but responds to all the pressures he puts it under. So will be you people to the one who I'm bringing from the north.

And he says to them, this is what's going to happen. And he's prophesying the coming of the Persian king Cyrus, who is the servant of the Lord in this occasion.

and this servant of the Lord is going to come and he's going to bring all the people back from exile.

And they're going to rebuild Zion. They're going to rebuild Jerusalem.

They're going to rebuild the temple. They're all going to be brought together after years and years and years of exile. He is going to be the instrument of bringing these people together.

And the Lord says this is going to happen and in fact it will happen. because the Lord can bring to pass that which he predicts. Well, then he turns again to the gods that are assembled on their floats, the idols, and says, who told of this from the beginning so we could know?

[9 : 09] Which of you beforehand could say he was, that we could say of you he was right? And then he takes them all and he levels them with the end of verse 26.

No one told us. No one foretold. No one heard any word from you. You were as silent as the tomb. And then he boasts about the Lord who is called in verse 21, Jacob's king.

A rather humble title for one whom Isaiah on another occasion addresses as the high and lofty one that inhabiteth eternity.

But the high and lofty one who inhabiteth eternity comes among the gods and he makes his case among them.

And he says, who of you said something so that your followers can affirm you and say you were right? You were right. Doesn't happen.

[10 : 14] None of you. And then he says of the Lord, Isaiah says, look, here they are. I gave to Jerusalem a messenger of good tidings for telling the event and bringing it to pass.

But among you, followers of the gods and your idols, there is no one, no one among you to give counsel, no one to give answer when I ask them.

They are false. Their deeds amount to nothing. Their images are but wind and confusion. And so he brings the chapter to an end and says, these gods stand for nothing.

And they can't answer any of the questions or demonstrate their authority. well, then you see, if you read this and you see this sort of triumphant put down of the gods, then my heart turns with heaviness because the gods of our age have turned the tables on the Christian community.

and they have taken control of the world and they have taken control of the future and they have eliminated the past that wasn't suitable to them and they are now the ones who are directing the whole course of history by modern science and modern technology and terrific human

achievements that boggle the mind.

[11 : 52] They are in control of our world and they turn to the Christian community and say, what of your missionaries that have fragmented the ancient and delicate cultures of our world?

And what of your abusive priests that have pretended to care for children and have abused them?
And what of the tyranny of your sexual puritanism by which you've tried to rob us of the freedom that belongs to us?

And why do you run from politics to hide behind piety? And how dare you challenge the great and ancient religions of the world?

And you have supported the tyranny of paternalism for just too long. Our world has turned on the religion of the Bible.

the great Bible narratives of creation and redemption and history are despised by you.

[12 : 59] And the great cathedrals of the world are now just ancient relics and the Christian nations have passed from the scene. And so the world has come to the conclusion about the Christian community which is precisely the conclusion Isaiah brought upon the idols of his own day.

And the Christian community is regarded in our world as a perpetuation of a delusion. You are working hard and producing nothing.

You are a wind that brings no rain. To be to choose to be a Christian in the modern world given what we know and given the power and authority we have is an outrage against our culture.

You are despicable. And so the case for the Christian faith is dismissed by our world. And if you can if you haven't read about it get tomorrow morning's paper.

you'll see about it there. Well that's about the position that we're in at the moment.

[14 : 25] But I want you to read on in Isaiah because Isaiah is an amazing book. I mean you know more of it than you let on. You know I mean just let me give you some hymn titles that are derived from the writings of Isaiah.

I mean most of the Messiah comes from there to begin with. But they that wait upon the Lord he shall renew their strength.

Fill thou my life O Lord my God in every part with praise. Lord speak to me that I may speak in living echoes of thy tone. We have heard a joyful sound Jesus saves from Isaiah 52 10 man of sorrows what a name for the son of God who came.

The great passion chorale O sacred head sore wounded and the wonderful hymn my God how wonderful thou art Christmas carol O come O come Emmanuel the hymn guide me O thou great Jehovah thou will keep him in perfect peace how firm a foundation all comes from Isaiah I strengthen thee help thee and cause thee to stand for I am with you even when you go through the deep waters like a river glorious is God's perfect peace Jesus thy blood and righteousness I picked those because I thought some of you would recognize most of them but you see that's been woven into the very structure of our faith and why well the reason why is because in

Isaiah chapter 40 to the end there is a very mysterious figure and that figure is called the servant of the Lord and as you read these passages and most people when they pick up Isaiah to read it can't figure out where it's going or what it's doing but you have to spend time with it and as you spend time with it and as the scholars have taken it and gone over it with a fine tooth comb trying to solve the mystery that lies at the heart of it because at the heart of it is the revelation of someone who is called the servant of the Lord the servant of God and listen to all this I've got a long list here to read to you of conclusions of what who the servant of God is as scholars and others have read devotionally and in study they say the one who is spoken of here is one of the patriarchs

[17 : 33] Abraham Moses one of them or he is the nation of Israel as a people he is the servant of God or he is not a nation but an individual who perfectly represents the nation or he is a prophet who speaks for God or he is a king who is of the royal line of David or he is a foreign king whom God has taken over and who is serving God's purposes or he is a messiah king who will bring in a messianic age in years to come or he is a servant people of God or he is the messiah when you come to is i the 53 you're forced to conclude he is Jesus Christ that's what it means to become a servant of God and a Christian is one who who has recognized that he is a servant of God belonging to a servant people of God well our society has set up an alternative this has set up many alternatives you can choose any one of hundreds but one

I'd like to talk to you about just briefly to give you a little background is freedom and what we have done because we have decided that freedom is really what life is all about and so we have

committed ourselves to finding freedom freedom freedom from all the tyrannies of the past freedom to travel at a thousand miles an hour freedom to invade outer space freedom to take away the drudgery of home and family life freedom in the accumulation of massive amounts of knowledge available to us freedom of the world and its past history freedom from the scourges of declining health freedom from the tyranny of dictators freedom from the constraints on our sexuality all these kinds of freedoms are what we boast and the exploitation of those freedoms which were first there was me there was

I if you want and then there was an idea about freedom and then it became an ideology and then it became an idol and now we worship it and the dark side of this god of freedom is described in an article in Harper's magazine where it says freedom not only invites you into a world of sweetness and light but every excess idiosyncrasy mania phobia passion and appetite sin peculiarity and grotesque imaginings that inhabit the psyche or that men invent in liberty and solitude all of which of course is the enemy of order and stability so we worship that freedom but you see even in that you know there's a statement in in

Proverbs 30 which says the earth trembles when a slave becomes a king well our earth needs to tremble because freedom that is meant to serve us now dominates us but at the heart of it there is still freedom and what does that freedom allow you to do that freedom allows you to recognize that who you are the essential being of yourself is that you are a servant of God that is you have chosen to be a servant of God and you have chosen to be that because the Lord Jesus Christ in whom you believe and in whom you trust recognizes that his life was to be a servant of

God and that he took upon himself this human flesh in order to demonstrate what it means to be a servant of God and he went to the cross in order to serve the eternal purpose of God so that the church comes along to you with great good tidings and says all right you have all this freedom I invite you to take that freedom and make the choice to become the servant of God the servant of the Lord to give yourself to be part of that company of people who are the Lord's servant in a world which neither knows nor honors it you choose that and if you choose that hypothetically in case you just to think about it you can you can understand that that you would be baptized into that faith and when you were baptized into that faith people would pray for you that you may be given grace to continue a soldier and servant of

[23 : 52] God unto your life's end so that the deepest awareness that you have of yourself is that no matter what circumstances may overcome you no matter what circumstances you are called to live in the primary reality of your life is to be a servant of God that's the great use of your freedom to choose to be a servant of Jesus Christ a servant of the one whose service we are told and often say is perfect freedom see that's that's what I think Isaiah is about to introduce you to the servant of God the servant of the Lord and to invite you to join the company that is a servant of the

Lord to invite you to recognize yourself that what you're here for and what your life is about is to be a servant of God who is not ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified a servant of God who will continue as a servant to your life and that's in effect what you're saying when you come to take part in the Holy Communion and receive the bread and wine you're saying I recognize myself to be a servant of God and I take this bread and I take this wine that I may be nourished and strengthened for the service to which I have committed myself in confessing the faith of Christ crucified it's a wonderful story isn't it and it's a wonderful challenge in a world which offers you unlimited freedom to take the opportunity to say

I will use my unlimited freedom to choose to be a servant of God Amen