



A SERVICE OF HEALING
(for those suffering emotional distress, grief, divorce, and physical ailments)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Isaiah 41:9-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 9) You whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”;
(v. 10) do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Healing, whether from physical ailments, emotional distresses, grief due to loss, or from the pain of broken relationships, has always been a desire and expectation for many who participate in worship within the African American church. Historically African Americans Christians have sought relief from the circumstances of life that overburden them but for which they could find no adequate relief in the world. Worship within the African American church has always sought to incorporate opportunity for worshippers to “lay their burdens down” and to “tell Jesus all about it.”

Today this relief is still greatly needed. So much angst and agony daily meets believers; ills roll over so many in avalanche fashion. Pastors and church leaders are deluged by those facing physical illness, emotional turmoil, overwhelming grief, and never-ending stress. We live in times filled with so much uncertainty and less community for those in need of support to heal from whatever ails them.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 41:9-10

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

In today's society, we are faced with problems that are not new but are more complex and confounding to the souls and hearts of people. Many pastors confess that many of the situations their congregants face require deep healing—not just on the physical level but also mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The preached word must be used to not only shout over things that have been healed but also to shout *through* that which cries out for healing.

As a former pastor and physical therapist, I was keenly aware of the “healing” needs within my congregation and the need to provide liturgical moments during a service for those seeking healing to experience it as God delivered it. The most powerful and edifying moments of worship I have experienced in 30 years of ministry have been moments when the people of God have been allowed to give open expression to their needs for healing and then be brought into the presence of God by the power of the preached Word. The Word aptly preached not only brings the knowledge of a loving and faithful God to hurting people but also creates an atmosphere for individual and corporate healing. It is in these preaching and worship moments that forming lines at the altar for healing is not necessary because the atmosphere is saturated with God's presence and people openly and privately receive healing for their souls, minds, and bodies.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Biblical scholars have traditionally divided the book of Isaiah into three distinct parts. The first section contains chapters 1–35; they address the judgment of God on the national sin of Israel and lead up to the captivity. Chapters 36–39 are a historic interlude that give a prophetic account of how God delivers God's people. The third section, chapters 40–66, contain predictions, warnings, and promises related to events beyond the captivity. This portion of the book is rich with messianic predictions.

The key word in the book of Isaiah is “salvation.” Isaiah's name in Hebrew translated is “*Yeshayabu*,” which means “Jehovah saves,” “Jehovah is salvation,” or “salvation of Jehovah.” Isaiah lived in turbulent times, times of great tension and crisis in ancient Israel's history. “In many respects it was a time of crisis in the history of the world. World-shaking events were transpiring. Catastrophic and cataclysmic judgments were taking place. There was upheaval in the social order.”¹ Isaiah prophesied during the critical times of both kingdoms, Israel and Judah.

While Isaiah prophesied during the last years of the northern kingdom, his message was primarily to the southern kingdom of Judah. Already the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen into Assyrian captivity. But another nation, Babylon, would eventually take Judah into captivity. The prophet Isaiah had the daunting task of preaching to a people in captivity a message of both divine judgment for sin and the promise of salvation and restoration.

Section III, chapters 40–66, in which we find our text, contains the message of the prophet concerning God's comfort and God's plan for salvation for the nation long in exile and captivity. This section has some of the most well-known and celebrated passages of Isaiah's writing, such as 40:1-5 used in Handel's *Messiah* and Isaiah 53, the prophetic vision of Christ as the suffering servant messiah.

In chapter 41 the prophet has the unenviable assignment of convincing a weary and defeated people that after nearly 70 years in captivity there is an end to God's judgment and that that judgment is not an indication that God has forsaken them. Indeed, God has been with them, even in the midst of hardship, despair, and captivity. The prophet in verse 9 tells the people that they are still chosen by God; they are those whom God has chosen from the ends of the earth. God's choice is intractable. God has not cast them away.

This is an important and powerful affirmation to God's people: there is no situation that comes into our lives, either by our own doing or those out of our control, that can separate God from those whom God has chosen as God's own (Romans 8:38-39). The nation is wedded to an all-powerful husband/God who pledges to keep vows of protection. God's omniscience watches over God's people and God's omnipotence supports them. What is significant here is the fact that God does not exempt those whom God loves from trials and tribulations, but promises to be with them in their trials, even in a state of exile and bondage. "There was no relief to the darkness that was heavy over them but there was the promise of comfort in the midst of the darkness."²

In order to obtain the benefit of God's promise to help us in difficult times, we must let go of our fear. The prophet tells the people in verse 10 to "fear not" and "not [to] be afraid." Often in scripture, we find God admonishing his people, to "fear not." Fear prevents us from accepting the presence of God. When we are afraid, our eyes are fixed on our problems and not on the mighty hand of God which can save and restore us. Fear, as one evangelist puts it, is "false evidence appearing real." When gripped by fear, those in need of healing often see their sicknesses or situations as larger-than-life. But when they let go of fear they are then able to see that they are being held up by God's strong and victorious hand.

We may experience sickness, death of loved ones, loss of relationships, mental breakdowns, and more. But what we are called to remember is that God has promised us, as God did the people during Isaiah's time, that despite what is happening in and around our lives, God is with us. It is in this acknowledgment of the presence of the Lord that we can find our strength and healing.

Just as it is difficult to see God working in our lives if we are gripped by fear, the same is the case if we possess an attitude of doom and gloom. We cannot hear messages of hope in the midst of despair, but that is what the people of God are called to do—to hear the good news in the midst of the bad: God is STILL with us, God is STILL for us even in our most heartbreaking and mind-numbing situations.

The prophet calls the people to let go of their fear and gloom to allow themselves to experience God's presence in their the midst of prolonged exile. When we let go of fear and gloom we position ourselves for healing in ways not readily recognized. The profound healing presence of God is the gateway to all forms of healing. God can and does heal physical ailments, God can and does change our circumstances, God can and does restore the things we have lost, but first God wants us to experience his presence as a prelude to our accepting that he will handle all of our difficulties. It is that presence that allows us to tearfully press our way to God when we are in the need of healing in our lives. It is that presence that gives us peace in times of trouble. It is that assurance of God's presence that allows the saints to be still and know that God is God. It is

God's presence that allows us to experience God's strength made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

Celebration

We celebrate that as we seek healing, God is with us, always. God has not forsaken us but is with us and is holding us up. God allows painful periods and crisis to come into our lives. This reality is bittersweet, but allows us to acknowledge that when we in pain cry out for healing, we are in a win-win situation. If we receive divine physical or emotional healing we win; if we do not receive healing or reversal of our circumstances we still win because our God is still with us. The message brings us shouts and resolve, praise and tears, triumph and submission, as we acknowledge that God will always be with and for God's people regardless of the circumstances. Isaiah 41:9-10 provides the type of promises from God that meet the needs of worshippers seeking healing in their lives. It speaks to us in our particular situations and offers us the opportunity to take hold of the promise, that no matter how dire the situation or how far-removed we may believe we are from God, God has promised to be with us in our pain and to bring healing when and where we need it most.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: The faces, expressions, and attitudes of the people to which the prophet is preaching—they are long in captivity and living without hope of restoration; the dreary atmosphere hanging over the exiled community, much like the experiences of those in our time who are living in exile, captivity, and poverty (e.g. those in Sudan, Darfur, Kenya, Palestine, and ghettos in the United States);

Sounds: The prophet Isaiah calling the people to hope in the midst of despair; the groans, moans and laments of hearing yet another message of restoration after years of suffering; the voice of the prophet rising above the doubts and fears to move the people to a point of hope in their God once again.

Images: Use another text in this section of the book of Isaiah, chapter 43:1-2:

(v. 1) But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. (v. 2) When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Create in the minds of hearers the image of going through floodwaters yet not being overwhelmed by them. Help people see themselves being carried above their situations by God's victorious right hand. Paint for listeners the image of walking through flames and yet coming through not burned, scorched, or even smelling of smoke.

Notes

1. McGee, J. Vernon. The Prophets: Isaiah. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991.
2. Spence, H.D.M. and Joseph S. Exell, eds. The Pulpit Commentary, Vol. 10. McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Company, 1981.