



Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times—Isaiah
Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; June 7, 2026
Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 4:16-21

As I mentioned in the church newsletter, during my ministry, I've heard many people say they have little use for the Old Testament. Some find it difficult to understand. Others struggle with its unfamiliar history, excessive violence, or relevance. Yet the Hebrew Bible was where my own journey with Scripture began when I was about eight years old. I fell in love with the grand narratives—Abraham setting out into the unknown, Joseph's journey from favored son to slavery to wise leader, Moses standing before Pharaoh, David facing Goliath, and Esther risking everything to save her people. These adventures filled with courage, failure, and grace helped me discover that the Bible wasn't simply a collection of rules but a collection of stories about God's relationship with humanity.

Throughout the years, I've continued to return often to these stories and to the Psalms, to find comfort, wisdom, and inspiration. Yet recently I have realized that there is one significant part of the Old Testament I have failed to explore as deeply as I would like: the prophets. These days, with all that is going on in our world, I find myself drawn to their voices.

Make no mistake, the prophets do not arrive with easy answers in hand, but they do invite us to see our lives and our communities through God's eyes, and they challenge us to ask hard questions. So this summer, in a series we're calling *Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times*, we will hear from prophets like Amos, who cried out against economic injustice; Micah, who reminded God's people that worship without justice is hollow; Jeremiah, who spoke hope to people living through collapse and uncertainty; Habakkuk, who dared to ask God difficult questions; Jonah, who learned that God's mercy was wider than his prejudice; and Ezekiel, who stood in a valley of dry bones and dared to imagine new life. As we listen to them, I trust that we will discover something important: The prophets were not fortune tellers attempting to predict the future. They were truth tellers who courageously spoke God's truth into their realities. Addressing war, greed, religious hypocrisy, and neglect of the poor, they warned of the dangers of worshiping empire, wealth, nationalism, or power instead of God—which means the prophets remain deeply relevant, because human beings are still wrestling with many of these same issues.

But if we stop there, we risk misunderstanding the prophets. For they were not simply critics of society or religious zealots shaking their fingers at the world. While it's true that prophets are often remembered as angry and fierce, if we look closer, we will see there is something deeper beneath their sense of urgency. Love. The prophets grieve what the world has become because they can still imagine what it could be. They carry what the Old Testament scholar and theologian, Walter Bruggemann, calls "the prophetic imagination" — the ability to envision a world beyond injustice, cruelty, and despair. And perhaps that is part of our calling too—not to merely criticize the world as it is, but to imagine the world as God dreams it to be.

This brings us to the vision described in our reading from Isaiah, where the prophet enters the temple and is suddenly overwhelmed by the holiness of God. The room shakes, smoke fills the space, and the heavenly beings cry out: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." Isaiah responds not with confidence but with honesty. "Woe is me! I am lost." Since real encounters with the Holy often reveal how small we are, Isaiah suddenly sees himself clearly. He recognizes his limitations, his fears, his brokenness—and that matters because God does not call prophets who already have everything figured out. God calls human beings who feel anything but qualified. In other words, prophetic ministry is not reserved for spiritual superheroes.

It's also important to note that before Isaiah is sent, Isaiah is touched by grace. A burning coal touches his lips and he hears the words: "Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Grace comes before mission. God does not say: "Fix yourself first, then I'll use you." God heals. God restores. God calls. It is only then that Isaiah hears the question: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And with all the courage Isaiah can muster, he responds: "Here am I; send me"—not because he suddenly becomes fearless but because God's grace compels him forward.

But what, exactly, was Isaiah being sent to say? According to Brueggemann, the book of Isaiah unfolds not as a single message but as a sweeping story of judgment, hope, and restoration. Spanning years of Israel's history, the book follows the fate of Jerusalem as it faces political turmoil, invasion, destruction, and ultimately renewal. At its heart, Isaiah asks a pressing question: What happens when God's people abandon justice and forget their calling? The first part of the book (chapters 1–39) contains sharp warnings. The prophet condemns a society where the powerful exploit the vulnerable and where religious practice has become disconnected from compassion. Again and again, Isaiah calls the people to seek justice, defend the orphan, and care for the widow.

Then comes a dramatic turning point. Jerusalem falls, the people are carried into exile, and everything seems lost. Yet beginning in chapter 40, Isaiah's tone changes from judgment to hope. "Comfort, comfort my people," God declares. The exiles hear the promise, "Do not fear, for I am with you." God has not abandoned them. The God who judged them is also the God who restores them. The final chapters envision a renewed community. The restored people are called not only to return home but to become a light to the nations, caring for the poor, welcoming the outsider, and embodying God's vision of peace. Underneath it all runs a single thread: God's unwavering desire for a community where justice and righteousness flourish. Judgment is never God's final word. Beyond every devastation stands the promise of renewal, and beyond every exile lies the possibility of coming home.ⁱ

Interestingly, Isaiah is often called the "fifth Gospel," because it contains the most comprehensive Old Testament prophecies about Christ. And we get a glimpse of how foundational the prophet is to the life of Jesus when, at the beginning of his ministry, he enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and unrolls the scroll of Isaiah to read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then Jesus rolls up the scroll, returns it to the attendant, sits down, and with all eyes upon him, declares, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Church, I think we desperately need prophetic voices today — not voices fueled by outrage alone or powered by self-seeking motives — but prophetic voices rooted in compassion and courage. We need voices willing to tell the truth about suffering, willing to defend the dignity of every child of God, willing to challenge systems that profit from fear and exploitation, willing to proclaim that another way of living is possible. And I'm convinced that the church is called to be one of those voices.

Over the course of this 12-week sermon series, the prophets will challenge us. Some weeks they will comfort us. Other weeks they will unsettle us. But holy disruption could be exactly what we need. While the process may be uncomfortable, disruption is not always destructive. Sometimes

disruption is how God awakens people and how new life begins. Sometimes disruption is what happens when love refuses to remain silent.

And so today, as we begin this journey together, perhaps the question before us is the same question Isaiah heard long ago: Whom shall I send? Who will speak compassion in an age of cruelty? Who will embody mercy in a culture of division? Who will work for justice when injustice feels overwhelming? Who will dare to believe that God is still at work bringing life out of dry bones and hope out of despair? The prophetic call is not only for ancient figures. It is also for us. Because God is still searching for people willing to say: “Here am I; send me!” Amen.

¹Walter Brueggemann, “A Story of Loss and Hope,” in *Sojourners* Nov-Dec 1998.
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