

“What Are We Asking For?”
A Sermon Preached by Jillian Flynn
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Isaiah 59: 1-15a

When I became pregnant with my son, many people told me how my entire outlook on the world would change. To some extent I believed them, I expected to be more worried about safety, more concerned with diapers than homework, and grateful for sleep regardless of the time of day. Though all these things have happened, they only make up a small portion of how my attitudes changed. I reflected on this the other day as I laid awake in bed holding a sick baby desperate to simply take away the pain and fever associated with teething. I recalled the judgment I used to have when people told me they allowed their baby or kid sleep in bed with them, back then I just swore I would never be that parent that co-slept. Little did I know, a few short years later I would be laying in bed with my son, praying that no one would judge me. Add sleeping in the same bed to the long list of things I swore I would never do, like leaving the house with a shirt with spit-up on it or leaving dirty dishes and laundry to be done the next day. Short from inviting you to laugh with me, I share all this because being a mother does change how I look at things in ways I never anticipated.

Once my son was in my arms I could not imagine my life without him and I would do anything to keep him out of harms way. To go home from the hospital with a fragile baby and turn on the news at 3am to see violence, destruction, and hate throughout the entirety of the country this momma not only want to wrap that baby in bubble wrap, but also made her ask is God even present in this world? And if God was there amongst the pain, why would God let me bring a child into this devastating world? I wonder if the Israelites were asking the same questions as the prophet wrote the passage from Isaiah read this morning. Where is God? Is God even with us anymore?

Scholars believe that the books of Isaiah were written over many years of time, so this passage most likely was written upon the return from exile. The prophet who wrote our passage this morning is believed to be one of the first to step into the ruins of Jerusalem. Imagine this: the kingdom is divided between north and south, the temple has been destroyed, and the people are still awaiting the restoration of the Davidic Dynasty. Just as a parent brings home a child and expects the world to match that baby's innocence, so did the Israelites return from exile with specific expectations. They were waiting for the restoration of the kingdom and the rebuilding of a temple in Jerusalem, for peace and beauty to abound, but found the same pains and struggles as before. It comes as no surprise then that some may even be losing hope or wondering if God was still faithful. So, in classic Old Testament fashion, in comes a prophet to explain the situation.

Isaiah 59:1-15 appears to have two sections 1-8, 9-15.¹ The first is a prayerful weeping, a searching for justice and the second is a communal prayer begging for God's response. The prophet uses these prayers to assist the Israelites in focusing on eternity and not society. He does so by warning the Israelites, letting them know that it is okay to have sorrows, but they cannot just sit back and yell at God. They must make space to invite God into their lives, even in the sorrows. The prophet recognizes that the people are hurting and angry, but also wants them to be instruments of goodness. The lament in verses 1-8 suggests God is not listening, but the prophet's rebuke amongst these laments suggest that the Israelites still are not sure what exactly they are asking for. They are in need of real conversation with God, not just requests for prosperity.

Isaiah 59 thus describes how the life led by Israelites in the past, makes it difficult to see God's presence by attributing success to answered prayers and trouble times as an abandonment by God. One commentator writes, "Isaiah begins this sermon-typed oracle by criticizing the people. This criticism comes in the form of magnifying the power of God."² By magnifying God, the prophet repeats to the people that God is still present and powerful. God has not alienated Godself from the people, even when it is hard to see God. God is there even in the destruction. God may in fact have far better plans than what the people know to ask for or may be answering the prayers by equipping the Israelites with the hearts and gifts to be instruments of prosperity in their society.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that this piece is more about entering into a dispute with the Israelites. By discussing both God's power and the people's feelings of betrayal, Isaiah maintains a theme of justice and waiting for this justice that has not come.³ The purpose is then one of convincing everyone to use the Spirit of God within them to cultivate a society of justice, as opposed to asking God to use his power to make the problems go away. The division, the judgment, the hatred between the people following the return from exile make it difficult for righteousness to prevail. This passage empowers an individual person to make a difference in the world by simply being a better person themselves. God's justice works by breathing life into all people. It is the invitation and freedom to use one's talents within a community. Isaiah shows God as the parent who helps God's children solve their own problems instead of solving them for them.

It is tempting to read Isaiah 59:1-15a as a reason to believe that God does not listen and God does not provide justice. You get the explanation of pain and suffering, the begging of the people to feel even the simplest inkling of God. But God never left the Israelites. God continually provides for them

¹ Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*., 684-695.

² *New Israel*, 32

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah*, Fourth Impression edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 194-96.

by creating a community of diversity, so that when the Israelites are working together they can become the fullness of Church and change the world. God was with them throughout the exile and remains with them as they return to the destruction. God still hears the Israelites when they pray. Justice may simply be coming in a way that people cannot see in their human state as they are blinded by their own expectations of what justice means or they are expecting a quick response from God. But is this real justice? A quick fix?

Isaiah 59:1-15a reminds people today that there is a reality beyond this world, and the definition of justice is not always easy. Isaiah tries to empower the Israelites to lead movements of justice in the world. Just as in the Gospels Jesus teaches the disciple how to pray, Isaiah uses these laments to help the people know what to ask for. Instead of asking for the end of destruction and the death of their enemies, they can ask for hearts big enough to love and accept the difference. Loving one another without judgment. Before I was a mother, I was quick to judge a situation I had never experienced, only to find myself in the same state of exhaustion. I cannot go back to those mothers, our lives are in different places now, but I can live into the beauty of this life. The beauty of being a mom, the beauty of being a Christian, the beauty of community, is the chance to give everyone a chance. Bottle-fed or breast fed. Lutheran or Presbyterian. Young or Old. Rich or poor. We are all children of God, who are called to live in loving community even if there is destruction and pain.

For Christians there are moments in our lives that make it extremely difficult to see God's love or justice. For those freshly out of exile, justice was a beautiful picture of peace and harmony, the end of all suffering. Many people today view God's righteousness in a similar accord. Unfortunately, just like the Israelites, the world we live in today is not that simple. However, along with the beliefs of righteousness, this text also provides readers with a lens to see the objections and complaints of this newly redeemed community. Today, we must learn the same harsh reality as the Israelites, evil abounds in the world due to free-choice. The beauty of this liturgical sermon is it witnesses to the ways in which God brings out justice even in those moments when the world appears to suffer. God's justice, given to us so that we may be free, always wins as free-will, though it can create evil, can also create love. When we find ourselves in moments of lament, lost and angry like the Israelites, remember Isaiah. God has not left, and God will not leave. We can ask God to sit in the sorrows with us, but we can also ask God the strength to overcome the evils of this world. We have a God who can use us to end the realities of destruction and hate which cause the sorrows in the first place.