

Bible Month 2022 – Isaiah: God here, now and yet to come

Hymn suggestions from *Singing the Faith* and StF+ to accompany Helen Paynter’s introduction to the book of the prophet Isaiah.

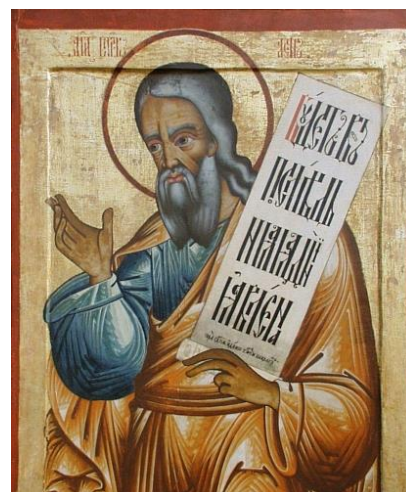
Hymns that may be helpful in exploring more than one of the weeks’ themes are marked with an asterisk (*).

1. Setting the scene
2. Tough love
3. Light to the world
4. The faithful servant
5. A new world

1. Setting the scene

Introducing the book of Isaiah, Helen Paynter unpacks something of the complex geo-political context in which the prophet and those who later spoke in his name were operating: around 200 years of turbulent times in all.

Israel and Judah were two nations with interrelated histories. Adjacent to them, “some great superpowers were flexing their muscles”: Assyria, “cruel, strong and greedy”, and Babylon, into which the great and the good of Judah were eventually taken into exile, leaving behind them the horror of their desecrated Temple, sacked and destroyed. These are events that will have particular resonance in the Europe of 2022.



It is to these events, and the people of Judah that Isaiah is called to speak. There are a few hymns in *Singing the Faith* that capture the prophet’s story in general terms.

I, the Lord of sea and sky (StF 663), with its refrain (“Here I am, Lord. . . I will go, Lord. . .”), which recalls the boy Samuel called by God at night-time, but also Isaiah’s vision and response – “Here am I; send me!” ([Isaiah 6](#)). Verse 2 in particular speaks of the people’s hearts of stone but God’s enduring love for them.

***The prophets’ voice comes down the years (StF 162)**. Alan Hinton explores the prophets’ role and concludes that their corporate voice “holds up a glass / in which we see our day; events which span the globe around / and things we do and say.” Also see: ***Make us your prophets, Lord (StF 665)** by Alan Gaunt.

By the Babylonian rivers we sat down in grief and wept (StF 694) speaks of the catastrophic exile of Isaiah 40ff., from which, nevertheless, some cathartic healing was eventually drawn.

Deep in the shadows of the past (StF 463) places the words of the prophets against the even broader backdrop of God’s covenant with the people of Israel/Judah and looks forward to “new hope for changing days”.

[O watcher in the wilderness](#) (StF 667) is also worth re-visiting. Its starting point is the story of Moses and the burning bush ([Exodus 3](#)) but its overall theme is of calling and commission – of God’s people as much as of God’s individual prophets.

2. Tough love

The concept of “tough love” goes to the heart of God’s relationship with the peoples of Israel and Judah. Helen Paynter sums it up neatly: **“God is love. But a God of love also needs to be angry sometimes.”** It’s an anger that rooted in God’s deep yearning for God’s people, expressed vividly in the imagery of Judah-as-vineyard.

[God is Love: let heaven adore him](#) (StF 103)

[God moves in a mysterious way](#) (StF 104) vv. 3&4

[God weeps at love withheld](#) (StF 700)

[Love divine, all loves excelling](#) (StF 503)

[Love inspired the anger](#) (StF 253)

God’s grief arises from the people’s abandonment of the divine-human covenant. They have failed to trust God, placed their trust in gods of other nations, and condoned social injustice and abuses. In response to structural and physical violence, Helen observes: **“I think we want a God who loves enough to rage at such things”** – the kind of love that can inform and inspire our own faith responses. This is also a theme taken up by the Methodist Church’s [Walking with Micah project](#).

[Heaven shall not wait](#) (StF 701)

*[Praise to the God who clears the way](#) (StF 183)

[Send down the fire of your justice \(Call us to be your compassion\)](#) (StF 413)

[The Church of Christ, in every age](#) (StF 415)

[The God who sings](#) (StF 714)

With one eye on the predatory superpowers martialling their forces beyond the borders of Israel and Judah, the prophet was preaching that “living in the promised land was a conditional benefit of the covenant; it could be taken away from them”.

[As servants working an estate](#) (StF 491)

*[Make us your prophets, Lord](#) (StF 665)

*[The prophets’ voice comes down the years](#) (StF 162)

[When listening prophets dare to speak](#) (StF 163)

3. Light to the world

Reflections on this theme bridge the Old and New Testaments. Christians have often identified Christ Jesus as the “light of the world”, not least because of the words contained in Simeon’s thanksgiving, at Jesus’ baptism, that he has seen a light to reveal God’s people to the nations of the world. ([Luke 2: 29-32](#); also see the [Nunc Dimittis](#) at StF 794.)

However, the calling of God's people to reveal God to the whole world is already very much present in the book of Isaiah.

[Be the light in my darkness](#) website only

[Christ, whose glory fills the skies](#) (StF 134)

[Darkness like a shroud covers the earth \(Arise, shine, your light has come\)](#) (StF 170)

[Father, in whom we live, in whom we are, and move](#) (StF 5)

[God who made the stars of heaven](#) (StF 7)

*[Take my life, and let it be](#) (StF 566)

Moreover, the prophet already speaks of God's love for those outside Israel (Egypt and Assyria) and those legally excluded from the temple, such as foreigners and eunuchs. It's a revelation every bit as startling for its time as that experienced by the apostle Peter in the book of Acts: God's love is not limited to the Jewish people but "in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" ([Acts 10](#)). Indeed, Helen notes that, as Christians, we are late to the party: "**the Gentile guests . . . only 'in' by the mercy of God**".

[Come, sinners, to the gospel feast](#) (StF 401)

[How small a spark has lit a living fire!](#) (StF 408)

[In this house all people will be welcome](#) website only

[Let us build a house where all can dwell \(All are welcome\)](#) (StF 409)

[There's a wideness in God's mercy](#) (StF 416)

This is a theme here that runs deeply through Methodist tradition, embodied for many in what are sometimes known as Wesley's "Four Alls":

All need to be saved

All can be saved

All can know themselves saved

All can be saved to the uttermost

Beverley Jones expands upon this summary in [For all he came, for all he lived](#) (website only), which itself echoes Charles Wesley's [Let earth and heaven agree](#) (StF 358), a hymn both gloriously public in its proclamation and also a deeply personal testimony of faith.

4. Faithful servant

Isaiah "**offers the sign of a young woman who would name her child 'God-with-us' (Emmanuel)**". It's a vision picked up and linked specifically to the birth of Jesus in [Long ago, prophets knew Christ would come](#) (StF 178) by Fred Pratt Green. It is helpful, perhaps, to re-visit other familiar Christmas hymns in this context and to focus on where they connect with the vision of Isaiah. For example:

[Born in the night, Mary's child](#) (StF 193)

[Hark! The herald-angels sing](#) (StF 202)

[Let earth and heaven combine](#) (StF 208)

In this section, Helen Paynter identifies those characteristics of “the faithful servant”, about whom Isaiah speaks a good deal. Each characteristic offers “**a glimpse of one of the ways that God operates**”. In particular, Helen suggests, the faithful servant embodies:

1. a quality of kingship at its most ideal – governing wisely and justly

*[Come thou long-expected Jesus](#) (StF 169)

[Morning glory, starlight sky](#) (StF 12) esp. vv.4-6

*[O come, O come, Immanuel](#) (StF 180)

[The kingdom of God is justice and joy](#) (StF 255)

2. the vision of Jubilee: “good news to the poor” and “liberty to the poor” ([Isaiah 61: 1-2](#), quoted by Jesus in [Luke 4: 14-24](#))

[God’s spirit is in my heart](#) (StF 404)

[Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes](#) (StF 171)

[I will speak out for those who have no voices](#) (StF 702)

3. suffering that benefits others: “**somehow, others are healed by his affliction**”

[A man, despised, and laughed to scorn](#) website only

[Pray for the Church, afflicted and oppressed](#) (StF 711)

*[Take my life, and let it be](#) (StF 566)

5. A new world

Helen Paynter writes of the prophet Isaiah “**straining towards God’s promised future**”. In later chapters of the book, he appears to be addressing the Babylonian captivity directly (“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God”, [Isaiah 40: 1](#)). But “**perhaps Isaiah has something more distant in view as well as the immediate comfort for the exiled people of God**” – a vision of a world made new that connects closely to the writings of the book of the Revelation.

[Be still and know that I am God](#) (StF 18)

[Give us your comfort, Lord](#) (intercessory response) website only

[Jesus calls us here to meet him](#) (StF 28)

[O love that wilt not let me go](#) (StF 636)

[There is a new heaven, there is a new earth](#) (StF 738)

[We follow the Lord along the gradual road to heaven](#) (StF 730)

[We pray until the hour](#) (StF 741)

There is also, once again, more than a suggestion of the themes of Advent present here. As Helen concludes: “**Even so. Come, Lord Jesus.**”

*[Come thou long-expected Jesus](#) (StF 169)

*[O come, O come, Immanuel](#) (StF 180)

*[Praise to the God who clears the way](#) (StF 183)