

Isaiah 9:1-7 (The Isaiah Quilt)

The traditional picture most of our congregations have about the nature of Biblical authorship is of a lone writer sitting at a desk, quill in hand, as an angel whispers words into their ear. The doctrine of inspiration they articulate might be more complex than that. This is the picture: lone figure, desk, divine whisper. Modern Biblical scholarship tells us that most of the Biblical texts were written in stages and that they were preserved, maintained, and added to by a community. The purpose of this story is not to explain in technical detail how the book of Isaiah came to be, but rather to put forward a rival image to the lone man at the desk. This image is a multi-generational quilt.

In many ways, Isaiah is one of the easiest books with which to put forward this image because its stages occur in the final form more or less in order and each addresses very distinct times and situations. When and why things were written remains a matter of debate. But the accepted three-stage authorship is: First Isaiah, chapters 1 to 39, Second Isaiah chapters 40 to 55, Third Isaiah chapters 56 to 66.

Imagine a quilt that has been in the family for three generations. It's affectionately known as Mamaw's Quilt. Mamaw worked on the quilt off and on her whole life. She did it the old-fashioned way: she sewed it by hand from old rags or scraps of fabric she had left over from other projects. Each square was a traditional pattern but the colours

and symbols she chose represented events in her life and her own cherished beliefs. When Mamaw passed away, the quilt was draped over her rocking chair, unfinished, with one square dangling.

So Mom began to work on the quilt. Of course Mom did things differently. She used a sewing machine. She went to Joanne's and picked out fabric patterns that she really liked. Mom wasn't afraid of using felt and buttons and the like. She did her best to make sure her portion was continuous with what came before while also putting her own spin on things. Each square represented her own life and beliefs. Mom worked on the quilt off and on her whole life. When she died, it was lying on her crafting table, unfinished, with one square dangling.

And so the daughter took up the quilt. She did things in her own way as well. She was able to crowd-source patterns online, she could send for fabrics from around the world through the magic of Amazon, and she had a Cricut she could use to cut intricate shapes. Though she worked within the patterns and traditions Mamaw and Mom had set, she wasn't afraid to try new things like asymmetrical designs and shapes that flowed from one square to the next. Square, in her case was just a technical term. Her squares could be rectangles, circles, and stars. Each one represented her own life and beliefs.

When she was finished, the quilt was finally big enough to complete.

Nevertheless, she hung it on the wall, unfinished, with one square dangling. She did this in hopes that future generations would take up the Mamaw's Quilt and add their own squares.

This image of a multi-generational quilt is a good way to think about the Book of Isaiah. We call it the Book of Isaiah after the eighth century prophet who started the work but it is a sprawling, 66 chapter, multi-generational work by three distinct prophetic voices speaking to their own time and place. Each is honouring the symbols and traditions that came before while taking them to new and exciting places. Reading a single passage from the book of Isaiah is like focussing on one square of an elaborate quilt. To appreciate the square, it is helpful to know something about who crafted it, the events and beliefs they are preserving, and how it fits in the larger work.

Like family members admiring a cherished possession, let us look at the Isaiah Quilt ...

The first quilter, the Advisor, lived around the 8th Century BCE:

This was Isaiah son of Amoz, the Prophet for whom the quilt is named. Isaiah was an advisor to four different Kings of Judah and he was prophesying during a time of crisis and change. The Advisor's long ministry witnessed the invasion and destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrian Empire and the rise of the Southern

Kingdom of Judah's importance on the national stage. Isaiah had to advise Kings on whether they should bend the knee to the Assyrian King, ally with Egypt against them, or trust God and go it alone.

The first square of the Advisor's row represents God. It depicts the LORD, high and exalted, the train of his robe filling the temple. The Advisor envisioned God as a great King enthroned in the midst of his people. For the Advisor, it is important that God is present in the Southern Kingdom. He is Immanuel. God with us. The whole land is filled with his glory which radiates from his temple in Jerusalem. In a time of change and crisis, the people needed to know that God was with them and that he was in charge. The Advisor believed that as long as God's people recognized his sovereignty, his promises would hold and no foreign power could do them harm.

The second of the Advisor's squares represents God's people. The square is a cluster of grapes. In the Advisor's famous Song of the Vineyard, he tells a parable about someone who builds a vineyard only to destroy it when it bears only bad fruit. "He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." This vineyard represented the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Advisor saw the Northern Kingdom's slide into idolatry and injustice as the bad fruit which resulted in their destruction. The Advisor saw this as a cautionary tale for the people of Judah. If they wanted to remain

in the land, they would need to succeed where Israel had failed and recognize their great King's sovereignty by keeping his covenant. What God had lovingly built, but in his anger, he could destroy.

The Advisor's square representing God's hopeful vision for the people is the dawning of a bright new day. Though the Advisor saw God as Israel's true king, he knew that human leadership matters. He advised both good kings and bad but his final king, Hezekiah, was a great king. Hezekiah followed in the ways of his father David and trusted the LORD. He oversaw the expansion of the royal city and a religious revival throughout the nation. The Advisor saw the ascension of Hezekiah as a bright new day for Israel because under his reign, God would remain enthroned in the midst of his people. In celebration of Hezekiah's coronation, Isaiah wrote that *'those dwelling in darkness have seen a great light,'* the focus of today's reading. It was the birth of a brand new day in which the boots and bloodied robes of war would be thrown into the fire for the LORD's anointed would rule as a Prince of Peace.

As beautiful and ambitious as the Advisor's quilt was, it leaves us with many questions. Will the people of Judah keep the covenant and recognize God as King? Will Hezekiah's reign set the new pattern or will his reforms be overturned? What will happen if Judah, like Israel, produces bad fruit? *And so the Isaiah Quilt was left unfinished, one*

square dangling, for a future generation.

The second quilter, the Comforter, lived during the 6th Century BCE. Fast forward 200 years. A new prophet picks up the Isaiah Quilt and begins to add new squares. Though he works with many of the same images and themes, he is addressing a very different time and place. The reforms of Hezekiah did not hold and, aside from three shining decades during the reign of his grandson, Josiah, the people ignored the pattern he had set. So, just as had happened to Israel, Judah was conquered by a mighty empire to the north. The Babylonian army marched, breached Jerusalem's walls, destroyed its temple, and deported its population. Now, 60 years later, the people are living in Babylon. They believe God has abandoned them and that they are beyond his forgiveness. It is this new prophet's job to speak tenderly to the people's pain and shame.

The Comforter's first square represents God. But rather than depicting God's form as the Advisor had so boldly done, the Comforter shows us only God's vantage point from heaven where he is comically enthroned above the circle of the earth. From here, human beings, with their armies and empires, are mere grasshoppers. The Comforter may have been the first pure monotheist in Judah's history. For him, the LORD was not simply a great King enthroned in the midst of his people, he is the only God. Beside him there is no other. A people

living in a foreign land without a temple need not turn to deaf and blind gods of wood and stone. Their God could hear and see them wherever they were.

If the Comforter's second square represents God's people, the people are a wounded animal, a bleeding lamb. The people of God have been traumatized and they need to be reassured that their suffering has not been in vain. They need to know God will use their experience of exile to bring about the healing of the nation. The Comforter returns, again and again, to a figure known as 'the suffering servant.' The suffering servant is a metaphor for the wounded Southern Kingdom which has been led like a sheep to the slaughter. But the good news for God's people is that these very wounds have the power to heal. Their time of punishment is over, they are forgiven, and soon their fortunes will be restored.

The Comforter's square representing God's vision of hope for his people is of a stream in the desert. The Comforter is charged with announcing that God's forgiven people have been redeemed and that he is about to lead them home. The Comforter envisions this return as a new Exodus. Just as God led them through the wilderness in the days of Moses, so he would lead them again. God will move heaven and earth to make it happen. Every valley will be raised and every mountain made low. God will provide streams in the wilderness for

them to drink and bread for them to eat. Then, when they finally arrive, it will be a day of exultation when mountains and hills burst into song and all the trees of the field clap their hands.

The Comforter's addition to the quilt was a fitting continuation but it left some questions of its own. Will the people leave Babylon to go back home and rebuild? Will they adopt the Comforter's radical new vision of a universal God? Will they learn from their experience of suffering and make the most of their second chance? *And so the Isaiah Quilt was left unfinished, one square dangling, for a future generation.*

The third quilter, the Anointed, lived during the 5th Century BCE. Now we fast forward another hundred years. A new prophet will pick up the Isaiah Quilt and add his own squares. Now the people are back in the land of Judah but things are very different than they were before the Exile. There is no king in Judah. The people have a governor and a high priest but they are a vassal state of the Persian Empire and recognize the Emperor as their king. This new generation of Judahites has grown complacent and largely abandoned the work of rebuilding the temple and the city walls. They are more consumed with their own lives. The new quilter must convince the people to wake up and finish what they started and trust that if they are faithful to live into their calling, God will bless them like never before. The era of prophecy is waning and giving way to the rise of powerful priests. He is a

transitional figure, the Anointed.

The Anointed's first square, depicting God, is the image of a Heavenly Father. In this time of complacency, when the great movements of history have given way to the mundane work of settling and rebuilding, God has begun to feel very distant. People have nostalgia for the days when God seemed much more intimately involved in the affairs of human beings. Channelling the people's longing, the Anointed cried, *"O that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you... but you have hidden your face from us."* Yet the Anointed believed that God was getting ready to reveal himself once again. But it would only happen once the people began to live faithfully into their calling. In this new time, when Kings were distant, absent figures, the Anointed reached for a different metaphor: *"But you, LORD, are our Father... look on us as we pray, for we are your people."*

The second of the Anointed's squares represents God's people as a ram's horn blasting the announcement of the year of Jubilee. The Anointed envisions God's people as a nation of priests. Just as a group of priests serves, blesses, and mediates for a community, so God's people are supposed to do for the entire world. The Anointed envisions that when the people finish rebuilding, the nations will come from every corner of the earth, bringing treasures and worshipping

Judah's God. Jerusalem will be the epicentre of God's overturning of the established order. This is the good news that the priest-prophet is anointed to proclaim to the poor: binding for the brokenhearted, freedom for the captives, and the year of the LORD's favour. The Anointed believes that the people were redeemed for a purpose: to serve God and announce his Good News to the world.

The Anointed's final square represents God's hopeful vision for his people. The square depicts a shining city on a hill. Jerusalem, when completed, will be a light to the nations. The Anointed saw the completion of the city as nothing short of the renewal of creation. He believed God would transform the cosmic order through his transformed people as he writes:

"See, I will create

new heavens and a new earth.

The former things will not be remembered,

nor will they come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice forever

in what I will create,

for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight

and its people a joy...

the sound of weeping and of crying

will be heard in it no more.

Never again will there be in it

*an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
the one who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere child;
the one who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.
They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people...
for they will be a people blessed by the Lord,
they and their descendants with them.
Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
and dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,"*

While these images complete the Isaiah Quilt, there is still a sense in which it is left unfinished. Will the people live into the call God has

placed upon them? Will the world be transformed as a result? Will God make himself known to his people as a Father? One square is left dangling. ***“You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”***

Let's imagine, again, Mamaw's quilt from before. Imagine that after the daughter finished her row of squares, she stitched the words Mamaw's Quilt into the fabric and rolled it up and put it in a chest. Now imagine that a century goes by and someone in the family opens the chest and finds the quilt. Maybe, despite some of the seemingly obvious signs to the contrary (the changes in style, form, and references to the present), they look at it and believe that Mamaw sewed the whole thing by herself. They suppose that she was a lone genius who could capture the events and styles of three different generations in one majestic whole. So they hang the quilt on the wall and admire it as the work of an unparalleled quilter named Mamaw.

You might think to yourself, “That's fine, as far as that goes. It's a naive but harmless point of view.” And in one sense that may be right. Whether Mamaw made the quilt on her own or whether it was the work of three generations of women would be nothing worth fighting about at a family gathering.

Yet something important would be lost by failing to recognize the

contributions of the mother and daughter. Their stories would be erased. More importantly, every time the family members walk by the one square dangling down, they will fail to see its profound invitation to them: to take up scissors and fabric, needle and thread, and begin anew the work of faithfully, scrap by scrap, and stitch by stitch, adding their own squares.

This is the invitation of the Isaiah Quilt to us... Each of us is invited to add our own square to the unfolding story of what God is doing. Each of us in our own time and place must decide how we will communicate who God is, what it means to be God's people, and put forth a vision of a hopeful future. This is the work of theology. Faithfully, stitch by stitch and scrap by scrap, each generation adds its own row, always leaving one square dangling. That is, until that day when the horn shall sound, and the One who is seated at the right hand of the Father, above the circle of the earth, shall return. Then he will once again rule amongst his people, leading them from the wilderness of sin and death to a good and fruitful land. There, on the Holy mountain, there will be a bright eternal dawn of a new unending day, for the Lamb will be their light. Only then will that last square, too beautiful and ambitious to imagine, be stitched into the quilt of hope.

Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE for NOVEMBER 16, 2025

Let us invite the Spirit of God to blow through our lives and our world, as we lift our prayers and petitions. We pray, O God, for all who have lost faith in themselves, in others and especially in you. May your Spirit renew and inspire them again!

We pray, O God, for all who have lost hope in what life can become for themselves and for all people. May your Spirit encourage and challenge them again.

We pray, O God, for all who need healing, from physical suffering especially Doug Wedman and Pr. Kristen Steele and all who need your healing from mental suffering, from loneliness, addictions, and abuse. May your Spirit console and strengthen them in their needs.

Loving God, who looks with loving compassion on all of your Creation, we lift up our prayers to you. There are so many who have been displaced — by flood and fire, hurricanes and typhoons, by war and famine. May they be fed and cared for, and may they find kindness on their journeys. Lead them to a safe place, to find comfort under the shelter of your wings. May they find their home in you.

For those who have experienced loss – of homes, jobs, good health, and of loved ones. Comfort them as they grieve the loss of that presence. May they find your love and the light of your promises. Lead them to a place of hope, to find glimpses of joy in their journey.

For those who have wandered far from you – who feel forsaken, forgotten, or fearful, may they find that you are not far off after all. May they trust in your prodigal love and run into your outstretched arms with joy where they will experience your loving welcome.

We pray for all whose lives have been turned upside down through wars and conflicts, leaving many refugees and starving: the people in Ukraine, those remaining in Gaza whose meagre tents and possessions have been destroyed by severe rains and storms; those in Sudan facing famine.

We pray for presidents, prime ministers and premiers, for those who hold responsibility for others in their leadership roles; for those who make decisions that impact the lives of those at home, at work, in our communities and in places of worship. Guide them in their deliberations and decision-making, that they may be discerning, humble and wise in their use of power and influence for the sake of the common good and well-being of all. Loving God, send your Spirit upon your church and its leaders. We lift up in prayer, Grace Dawson Creek and its lay leadership team and Deo Lutheran in Salmon Arm - Rev. Erik Bjorgan. We pray for ELCIC Bishop Larry Kochendorfer, ELCA Bishop Yehiel Curry, Bishop Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Shane Parker; the Bishops and congregations of the Moravian Worldwide church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, our sister congregation San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, and Holy Trinity Lutheran in Port Angeles. Bless the ministries of all deacons, pastors, lay leaders, musicians and volunteers.

We pray, for those of us who are comfortable – safe, healthy and secure. We heartily thank you for your many blessings. May we be agents of your blessings to others as we seek the peace and prosperity of this city. Lead us to those whom you look upon with compassion – the overworked, the underfed, the neglected and the depressed. Fill us with your grace and mercy and love, that we may be healers in your name. To you alone we turn our eyes and lift our hearts, in the name Jesus Christ, who lives to intercede for us, and who taught us to pray:

Our Father ...