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Views from the Titanic: A Meditation on Isaiah 35

By Karen Davinia Taylor



Deckchairs

I read an article a while ago that suggested I was short-changing myself when I viewed Isaiah from my twenty-first century deckchair. It made me sit up – could they be right? Could war-torn Israel, exiled and bereft of all that was familiar really have suffered from PTSD over two millennia ago?¹ Were Walter Brueggemann's metaphors of exile and homecoming too romantic - appealing because they positioned ancient Israel's desolation and fury at a safe distance - the way our televisions can inoculate us to the horror of famine, war and homelessness? I paid attention because of a sink-

ing feeling the author was correct; that cultural, geographic and historic distances have rose-tinted our vision of the text. But what might that mean for my reading of Isaiah 35 – was this singing declaration of God scooping us out of danger to bring us safely, joyfully, home, rose-tinted escapism by the prophets themselves or a light to our path?

Growth begins when we acknowledge that all of us see in part. This is the nature of human frailty and of living in this space between the now of Jesus' coming and the not yet of his return. We may already live with a longing for his appearing, to see

¹Carolyn J. Sharp, "The trope of "Exile" and the displacement of Old Testament theology," *Perspectives In Religious Studies* 31, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 153-169, 162), citing Daniel Smith-Christopher's *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).



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him face-to-face and be changed into his likeness, to know him as he is. Until then, our knowing is limited and fractured. It takes courage, grace and humility to acknowledge that we are all partially blind; that it is wisdom to yield to God's correction.

None of us can change the lenses of our particularities, the truths or distortions of our experiences of home and for some, exile. At least, not on our own. We need each other. We need the light of God's prophets, and of course his Holy Spirit. And we can trust that God is at work through his word and his prophets to grant clearer vision, and open hearts to new ways of seeing and being.

Prophetic community in Isaiah

When I first discovered that a majority of biblical scholars today considered the book of Isaiah to have been written by a school of prophets over a period of time, my individualist cultural glasses got a bit of a knock. The idea of God's prophetic word being honed within a school of prophets took a little getting used to. Yet the more I partner with God through his Holy Spirit, word and community, the more I delight that God chooses to work through community to reveal himself and shape his people.

The book of Isaiah spans three broad historical periods in the history of Israel: before, during, and after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BCE and exile to Babylon, and these historical events supply a frame of sorts (1-39; 40-55; 56-66), yet Isaiah's complex structure blurs these divisions uniting multiple voices into one prophetic book. To treat it as a literary unit is to honour the book of Isaiah and the community that gave it birth.

Chapter 35 is one of those sections that blurs the boundaries. Positioned in the pre-exilic period known as First Isaiah (1-39), the text reads like a letter to a community already in exile, linking it to Second Isaiah (40-55) yet with eschatological overtones as YHWH's coming brings all things to their fulfilment. The prophet's voice draws images of the blossoming wilderness (35:1-2, 6b-7), restoration of health (35:3-6a), a safe highway,

and the ransomed return (35: 8-10), all much more like the comfort of Second Isaiah (40-55) than the warning tones of earlier chapters. Chapter 35 also connects with images of Isaiah 24-27, as in Isaiah 27's Song of the Vineyard with its promise of Jacob taking root, Israel blossoming...and filling the world with fruit. Chapter 35:10's description of "sorrow and sighing" fleeing away reflect the YHWH who wipes away our tears in Isaiah 25. And just as in Isaiah 24-27, chapters 34-35 hold Edom and Zion face-to-face, with Edom suffering judgment against Zion receiving grace.²

Rose-tints?

Whatever colours tint our vision, to see clearly, to see past our own lies and assumptions, is harder when life is comfortable. Think of that deckchair on board a great ocean liner. It's a long way from Babylon yet in this meditation on Isaiah 35, I suggest that the prophet poet is addressing a deckchair perspective. The metaphor risks minimising the distress but it highlights that time has passed since the initial trauma of exile. The text hints that the prophet's audience are a people who have obeyed Jeremiah's instructions to settle (Jeremiah 29:1-14) fulfilling the LORD's intention that they bless their oppressors and in that settling they have found a degree of comfort. They are exiles and children of exiles who have either forgotten what home is like or never knew it, an audience no longer familiar with home nor how to get there. Sound familiar? Having been part of various churches over several decades, there are times when I wonder how well we know what home is like, the home God calls us to. How intentionally do we partner with God in the shaping of our identity and character as the particular people of God?

The journey home

One of God's gifts to the Jewish people that the centuries have made evident is the robust nature of their national character. As a people, they have taken the hardship endured, and partnering with God, have used it to shape an identity. The attitude of treating hardship as tender correction at the hand of a loving

² Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 17; C. R. Seitz, *Interpretation: Isaiah 1-39*. (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 10, 237-239, Isa. 27:6; 25:8; Seitz considers Edom representative of any nation violating God's restored vineyard.

parent is described in Hebrews 12 by a first century Jew, possibly raised in the exiled diaspora and so within the shadow of Isaiah's first audience.³ This Hebrew preacher, having called us to look beyond present hardships and see a larger purpose, draws from Isaiah 35 to exhort us to participate in God's healing:

¹²Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.
(Hebrews 12:12)

In these bracing words of comfort, the writer to the Hebrews opens a gateway to the even greater comfort of Isaiah 35, a chapter that also sets the pain of correction in a context of hope, calling exiles to join the journey homeward together.

First, rage: Psalm 137

This original audience was raised under a judgment carried out against their parents. They were nursed on their mothers' grief, a grief that Psalm 137 acknowledges in chilling terms with the psalmist crying out for a similar judgment against their betrayers. For reasons beyond our grasp today, Jacob/Israel points the finger at Esau/Edom, a neighbour and relative, for failing to stand by them. The psalm moves from outraged grief, "How can we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?" to burning anger and a need for justice, but one demanded in terms of equivalent violence. This song invites us to sit for a space with Isaiah's war victims in the dust of Babylon, but we are not asked to stay there.

Isaiah chronicles this grief, responding to it by reminding them, and us, that it is God who judges and none escape that judgment. The prophet articulates judgment and grace with haunting beauty and stomach-churning horror. Through the judgment oracle of Isaiah 34, the prophet invites those dwelling in the transience of exile to see that there is a judgment greater than their exile, reminding Israel/Jacob how one who betrays his own blood, Edom/Esau, faces a devastation even greater than theirs. Edom is to be laid waste, its land inhabited permanently by such creatures that make return forever impossible. Isaiah 34 describes the sort of desolation known only by the dispossessed who have no home to return to.

With assurance of justice: hope and joy

In the midst of this desolation, Isaiah announces a homecoming of exuberant joy. When God comes to take us home, joy will

have no end. Telling the truth about the ugliness of human sin and its consequences, this prophetic book ushers us into YHWH's presence, yielding glimpses of holiness, glory and redemption; granting comfort and hope. The prophet writes to a people in despair that though Zion's own home had been laid waste, yet it is capable of repossession; there is hope. Perhaps it is the exiles' despairing cry of 'where is YHWH in all of this' that prompts the poet/prophet to take as his salvation song a desert image of transformation – *beginning with the known, he journeys his people towards what has become unknown, their home.*



The Desert Will Bloom

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.



³ Hebrews 12:12. While Hebrews doesn't identify its author clearly, its powerful Greek rhetoric, Jewish Temple knowledge and masculine pronoun point to a Jew growing up within the exiled diaspora – in a city like Alexandria or Rome.

Isaiah 35 opens somewhat abruptly, taking it for granted that we know both the starkness of the desert and the suddenness of its blooming. The poet captures audience attention with an image that is intensely familiar to dwellers of desert climates, though foreign to dwellers of Aotearoa. It is the sudden, expected, yet never-failing-to-astound bursting forth of life as spring rains come to arid desert spaces - physical evidence of life flourishing, hope returning, creation made new - singing comfort and shouting promise.

For a people far from home, perhaps a generation yet to see Zion, vv1 and 2 answer the questions: *What is home like? Is it still there? Do we really need to return? Is it worth it?* And even: *what does the glory of the YHWH look like?*

The prophet answers with this evocative call, drawing on what is familiar to children raised on the edge of the desert. To paraphrase – *you know* these natural phenomena, life returning to the desert, the mighty trees of Lebanon, and Carmel and Sharon, those valleys of fertile beauty and abundance... Well, that's what the glory of the LORD is like. And it will return, as surely as the spring rains – such is God's faithfulness. And that's what life will be like when YHWH returns. And it will last, it has the staying power of the most fertile regions you can imagine, the most majestic forests.

Having taken hold of their imagination, the poet turns to answer their objections: fear, physical weakness, a long difficult and dangerous journey - *we know* the desert, we'd run out of water, we'd be killed by dangerous beasts, we'd never get there.

³Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

Verse 3 is another profound image of strength and comfort, with allusions to Job strengthening others, echoes of Moses, the Exodus, defeating the enemy, the people supporting each other, and YHWH giving victory and protection.

⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."

Verse 4 also draws on familiar words of encouragement reminding of God's saving presence - Joshua, getting ready to enter the promised land is assured that YHWH is the One who

goes with him.

To those struggling with demoralising fear, another's anger on their behalf can shock in ways that break old habits of thinking. In exile, suffering God's judgment, many would be tempted to question God's faithful presence. Yet, as the writer to the Hebrews recognises, future peace depends on seeing God's loving hand at work, even in hardship (Hebrews 12:12). To hear that when God comes to save, he will also bring recompense – a righting of wrongs, such is his care – induces the 'sit up and take notice' response, especially when the promise of Isaiah 35:4b has a direct link to the vivid descriptions of unending judgment in Isaiah 34:8. Many today are blind to Isaiah's awareness that when God comes to save, those who refuse that salvation choose judgment.⁴

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

With courage rising, curiosity intensifies – tell us more, what will it be like? What is God's presence like? As the prophet's words stir new ways of seeing in their spirits, he reminds them in verses 5-7 of the power of their God to heal and strengthen. And as his audience open their ears to hope, they find themselves enabled to welcome God's presence, releasing exuberant joy. And the welcome works both ways – those who were once outcasts are made new and themselves now belong to God's people, joining the happy throng.

Hope begins to break through the dry ground of despair, but a question remains: How – how can this be? It is the wondering question of a faithful heart, the same question Mary asks the angel Gabriel. In response, the poet takes them again to what their eyes have already told them, *you've seen* the wilderness transformed, *you know* how this works, as waters burst forth, so must life – and his words stress abundance, more than enough to sustain overflowing life - the thirsty ground is not only sated, it becomes a source of life and a place to find rest; uninhabitable places can now sustain life so lush that lonely desert scavengers like the jackal would not stop there.

Finally, the audience now believing without seeing, ask a differ-

⁴ For further discussion on this, see Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice*, Chapter 5. Also Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), especially 296-299.

ent question: *How will we get there?* Again, the prophet has a reply – when God comes, he makes a Way.

⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.

In verses 8-9, we see a way that is safe for all who travel on it, in strong contrast to the threat and danger of Isaiah 34. The safety extends to the travelers themselves, who live lives worthy of walking in the Way, with strength, energy and the physical wholeness (v3) to walk that highway. Yet the words leave open the possibility of more transformation - God's salvation is so great that the unclean and the fools can find cleansing and right living as the way encompasses them. It is for the redeemed – while judgment is great, so is the power of salvation.

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Verse 10 is the climax of both chapter and journey, the end is the return, the arrival. Zion is God's city, home to the ransomed of YHWH. Even as the wilderness returns to life with the faithfulness and eternal promise of spring rains, the ransomed of YHWH will return home. And as the desert cannot but respond to water except by flourishing, so God's people respond to his coming by returning, joy, and the rest of being home.

I woke this morning aware that as I've 'worked' on this passage, it has been at work in me. A blind spot to areas of dryness in my heart and spirit is now visible, a crack appearing in hard ground, as the water of the Spirit of Life breaks it open. And so we return to this present century where eyes, particularly for those in the West, are focused more on the comfort of the deckchair and view, than recognising icebergs ahead and navigating safely to the home God has prepared for us. In Isaiah 35, we find words of joy and hope in the reassurance that God is faithful to do as he has promised and bring his people home.

What can at first glance appear as words of simple comfort, God fixing everything, on closer engagement reveal that our deliverance requires our partnership - yes, God is faithful to bring us home, but his love restrains him from doing everything for us. Our deliverance includes participating with God and one

another in the shaping of our character and destiny, beginning by remembering whose we are. *Isaiah sees the dangers of not just losing the way home but forgetting that we have a home to return to, an identity as God's particular people.* His expert hand has crafted in this chapter, images that call us home as well as a map to guide us, if we but have eyes to see.

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Her MTheol (2015), explored how different New Zealanders understand practices of honour within the Church. She's looking forward to beginning a PhD, identifying the relation between stories and practices of faithfulness.

She's an avid landscape gardener, mid-century design fan, occasional playwright / actor / director, kayaker and swimmer.

The Long Walk

By Revd James Bhagwan



At the invitation of Revd Amy Chambers, Tikanga Polynesian Councillor for AWSC, Revd James Bhagwan writes about his late mother, Rachel Bhagwan who was a mentor of Revd Amy and a dear friend. They both came from Labasa, Vanua Levu.

My mother, Rachel Bhagwan, introduced me to the practice of walking for a cause. Over the years we have "walked" (a term I prefer to "march") for women, girls and children who suffer from violence, to reclaim the night, to raise our concern at the issues of water rights and for human rights.

We have walked in celebration. We have walked to raise awareness. We have walked in protest. We have walked in solidarity.

The last time I walked with my mother through the streets of

Suva for a cause was last year's *Reclaim the Night March*, on Saturday March 8 — International Women's Day. It was not an easy walk for her. She was battling breast cancer at the time. Yet to encourage her two youngest grandchildren, to affirm the work for women which her daughter and eldest granddaughter and to support my efforts in rounding up some of our young men from the Dudley Church youth group to join the march, she walked.

She set her best foot forward and kept her pace throughout the march. So consistent was her pace that at one stage during the march I had to ask her to slow down. When she asked why, I informed her that because the young women leading the march had tired and slowed down and, because of her consistent pace, she was now leading the march!

Earlier this year, she was "not feeling well" enough to walk in the solidarity march for West Papua. But she sent her blessings to share with her friends and those who knew her who were walking.

Last Saturday, my dear mother walked with us in the *FASA-NOC Women In Sports Walk & Talk* to raise awareness on breast cancer as part of "Pinktober" the month of raising awareness on cancer, particularly on breast cancer and other forms of cancer affecting women and funds for organisations that work with those facing the battle with cancer.

Unfortunately dear mother was only present in spirit and in a picture that her little granddaughter Antonia carried during the walk. She had won the battle with breast cancer, but lost the war, passing away on July 31 this year.

Last year when she announced to our family about her "lump" we rallied around her, as we had done in 2010 when my sister Sharon was diagnosed with breast cancer. Like Sharon she had her mastectomy and chemotherapy. We were grateful that she did not have to go for radiotherapy as Sharon had endured.

The initial results were good! She recovered and was back in action, carrying on with her civil society work and generally

doing good, listening to and helping those who needed an ear, or an advocate. We celebrated her 76th birthday in November. We celebrated Christmas.

This year we marked the first anniversary of her mastectomy. Mum was strong. Mum was a survivor but this was not to last.

Following Mother's Day this year, her health declined, rapidly. By the time test and scan results came back it was too late. Because mother had left it too late. The cancer had been removed from the breast last year, but had already made its way into the blood stream and to her brain. The test of the lymph nodes and all the focus on the breast cancer was clear, but the damage was being done elsewhere.

She struggled with dignity and with her amazing sense of humour, until she could no longer fight. It was a struggle for me, who had known this woman all

my life as a vibrant, beautiful, spiritual force of energy, of activity, to see her lying helpless in bed. It took all my faith and courage to minister and care for her with my family members and finally guide her into eternal life.

The irony of it all was that along with my late father, my mother was one of the early advocates of breast cancer awareness. I grew up knowing about breast cancer in both women and men and have always known about self-examination for breast cancer. Both parents discussed cancer in men and women openly at home among other issues affecting life in Fiji. She had seen her own daughter's battle with breast cancer and supported her through it.

Yet she had neglected to trust herself, her instincts in addressing her own condition until she was compelled to do so by the family.

On Saturday 3rd October, my family participated in the walk to mark the beginning of *Pinktober* – the Fijian month of awareness for breast cancer and other cancer faced by wom-



Revd James Bhagwan was the Guest of Honour at the Holy Trinity Anglican School annual Prize-Giving this year

en. I held my daughter's hand (and carried her on my shoulders when she got a little tired) as she carried her grandma's photograph. We walked for mum/grandma. We walked for sister/Aunty Sharon. We walked for the mothers, sisters and daughters of our community, who have struggled, fought, survived and lost the battle with cancer, in particular breast cancer. We walked for our friends who have walked on and walked strong for their children and now for the children of others. We walked to remind ourselves to be aware of cancer as a reality in our family.

Later that morning I heard one of my sisters in ministry, Deaconess Asena Senimoli, share her experiences to those who participated in the *FASA-NOC Women In Sports Walk & Talk*. Like many women, she went through denial and looked at every reason and option under the sun to avoid facing the fact that she had breast cancer. Yet she was able to face her condition and fight it successfully.

It is sad that we are only able to celebrate a few who face their fear and

fight. Far too many of our mothers, sisters and daughters — as well as our fathers, brothers and sons — choose denial until it is too late to do anything but manage symptoms.

Yes, the idea of having cancer, any kind of cancer can be scary, for both women and men. Yet we must not let our fear paralyse us. To those who have family members facing cancer, or possibly facing cancer, support them to make the right decision to get tested and get treatment.

"Simplicity, serenity, spontaneity."

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The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily represent the views of the Methodist Church in Fiji.

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The Centre for Anglican Women's Studies, commonly known as the **Anglican Women's Studies Centre** was set up to serve and to advance the interests and needs of the women of this Church particularly those undertaking Theological training.



The Link Representatives from each Diocese and Hui Amorangi have been chosen for their leadership ability to identify, gather, facilitate, resource and encourage women in their educational preparation for ministry whether lay or ordained. It is hoped that the Anglican Women's Studies Centre can continue to enjoy the support of each Diocese and Hui Amorangi in this endeavour.

The issue of increasing numbers of women in representative positions across the councils and committees of the Church is seen as a high priority and the practice of intentional mentoring by those already in national and international representative roles is seen as a good way to expose women of this church to fulfill their potential as leaders.

Ensuring that women's voices and stories are heard now and in the future is also one of our continued aims whether it be by traditional methods of publication or using more contemporary technologies like website publication. We remain optimistic that through continued support, the needs of women throughout this Province will be valued and recognized.



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