**WEEKLY SEEDS: 1-22-23 Third Sunday after Epiphany| Year A**

**Focus Theme:** Recognize Greatness

**Focus Prayer:** Great and Glorious God, let us recognize you in all your glory and all your greatness. Amen.

**All readings for this Sunday:** Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27:1, 4-9, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-23

**Focus Reading: Isaiah 9:1-4 in conversation with Matthew 4:12-23**

**9 But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.
2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.
3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.
4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.**

**Matthew 4:12-23**

**12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the**

**territory of Zebulun and Naphtali,**

**14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan,**

**Galilee of the Gentiles—**

**16 the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat**

**in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”**

**17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven**

**has come near.”**

**18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is**

**called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they**

**were fishermen.**

**19 And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”**

**20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him.**

**21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee**

**and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their**

**nets, and he called them.**

**22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.**

**23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming**

**the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every**

**sickness among the people.**

**Focus Questions:**
**1. How do you define greatness? What are ways you recognize greatness?
2. How have you been impacted by encountering greatness in your history?
3. Why does greatness matter? Is it important to strive for greatness?
4. How might the pursuit of greatness be problematic?
5. Where do you perceive greatness in the good news of Jesus Christ?**

**Reflection** By Cheryl A. Lindsay

**Have you ever ridden a roller coaster? As you begin, there is that agonizingly slow ascent. It seems to take forever and you can hear and seemingly feel each rotation of the wheels against the larger frame. Once you reach the top, there is the briefest of pauses before you begin that startlingly quick descent. The contrast between that first going up and first coming down is disorienting and distressing. After that, the other twists and turns can still be jolting and even alarming, but at the same time, they become familiar. You get used to the ups and downs even if you never become comfortable with them.**

**The prophecy of Isaiah progresses like a roller coaster ride. Of course, these manufactured rides only last a few moments–measured in seconds and minutes.**

**The ministry of Isaiah spans centuries. While the length of the ascents and descents may last for generations, the pattern remains consistent. The focus scripture falls within a larger passage that begins with Isaiah 7. We explored the opening verses during Advent as we observed King Ahaz rejecting the Sovereign One’s offer to ask a sign. Prophets speak to the powerful, and Isaiah’s ministry can be traced by his interactions with the kings who reigned during his era. The promise of a child found in Isaiah 7-9 is often related to the eventual coming of Christ, but historically, the prophet refers to the son and heir of Ahaz, King Hezekiah, who’s rule promises a new era of righteousness and redemption.**

**This birth announcement might be read as a hopeful description of Hezekiah’s birth, because the darkness of the military threat of Syria and Israel did overshadow Judah at that time, and the light of liberation was about to break.**

**That darkness, however, was only the first shadows at twilight compared to the darkness of the Assyrian domination that Judah would suffer. The brief light of Hezekiah’s reign would be quickly extinguished by his son and successor,** **Manasseh. Manasseh would repeal all the religious reforms of Hezekiah and mislead the nation “to do more evil than the nations had done that the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel” (2 Kings 21:9). The hope for a government “with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore” (Isa. 9:7b) certainly was not fulfilled in the person of Hezekiah. The promise of Immanuel is consistent with Hezekiah but is greater than Hezekiah**. Gary W. Light

**Part of the lesson found in the rhythm of rising and falling in Isaiah is that both people and circumstances change. Promises made and fulfilled are done so in light of those conditions but are also temporary by nature. The promises of forevermore seem fantastical and unattainable because the experience of human history is that evil and its forces are persistent and adaptable. If it’s not the Assyrians, it’s the Babylonians. In an earlier era, the people were tormented by the Egyptians. The Roman Empire will come much later. Some new amalgamation of human power for power’s sake will come on the scene and consume the resources of more vulnerable people. A good and principled ruler serves as a welcome change and diversion for the people who suffer from both poor national leadership and the tyranny of conquering foes. Hezekiah will be a refreshing change, but his governance provides a respite not a transformation.**

**So will the book of Isaiah takes us on this roller coaster ride, with its stomach turning twists and turns, there is a common thread that tethers us like an anchor to solid ground: the sovereignty of God. The uncertainty of life provides an invitation to trusting in God. When you take the ride at an amusement park, you trust in the construction of the machine and the attention of the operator. The ride of life calls us to trust in the Creator.**

**In the Old Testament, faith is more a matter of trust than belief. Walter Brueggemann expresses it well when he writes that faith “is not a matter of intellectual content or cognitive belief. It is rather a matter of quite practical reliance upon the assurance of God in a context of risk where one’s own resources are not adequate” (Brueggemann, Isaiah 1–39, 67). Faith is leaning on God for support in the face of difficult decisions that life thrusts upon us. It is trusting God to be the reliable Giver of our security and our future. Faith makes one vulnerable from the world’s point of view because it risks one’s self completely, trusting the intangible promises of God, not the material support of the world. Faith, therefore, is not a theoretical exercise in thought as much as it is a vital encounter in life.** Gary W. Light

**That same trust-evoking dynamic is at work in the gospel passage. There has also been a quick series of ups and down in the initial launching of the public ministry of Jesus. The high occurs in the baptism of Jesus, which also serves to start the transition from John the Baptist to Jesus in leadership in this movement of** **repentance and participation in the kindom of God. John has now been arrested and Jesus flees for his own safety to Galilee. Whenever Matthew uses the term “withdrew” to describe Jesus’ movement, it is in response to a threat.**

**When Jesus is threatened, he may move but he does not withdraw from his purpose or stop his participation in the coming kindom. His faithfulness and confidence inspires trust in others. He calls the ones who would become among his closest companions and disciples. The call is simple – to join him on the journey.**

**It is notable that Jesus is here calling disciples from among the lower social ranks. Warren Carter, describing their status, notes that in Cicero’s ranking of occupations, owners of cultivated land rank first and fishermen last. In Athenaeus’s writings they are placed on a par with moneylenders and are socially despised as greedy thieves. Furthermore, they are obligated to the empire, which has an economic monopoly. As Juvenal records, “Every rare and beautiful thing in the wide ocean … belongs to the imperial treasury.” Not only must they supply enough fish for themselves and the empire, they must pay tax upon what they retain and tax upon any transport of fish. Indeed, Peter, Andrew, James, and John lead an economically and socially precarious existence.** Anna Case-Winters

**The disciples will find themselves following Jesus on a path full of sharp twists and turns, deep lows and incredible highs. What they left behind was a rocky existence, but they do leave for the promise of an easy road. They follow Jesus because they recognize greatness. Matthew ties this moment to the promise found in Isaiah and invites his readers to connect the hope of a well-known story to the hope of Christ. Matthew’s audience would have been familiar with the short-lived tenure of righteous rule under Hezekiah and builds on that to frame the ministry of Jesus within the realm of the kindom.**

**Like in the era of Isaiah, the sovereignty of God engenders hope and trust. It transcends changing circumstances and people in power. It’s that assurance that no matter how perilous the ride may seem, a soft and sure landing awaits. We are held firmly in place through it all. We may rejoice because even in the midst of gloom, we still recognize greatness.**

**Reflection from Voices of People of African Descent:**
The 33rd General Synod adopted a Resolution to Recognize the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024). As part of its implementation, Sermon and Weekly Seeds offers Reflection from Voices of People of African Descent related to the season or overall theme for additional consideration in sermon preparation and for individual and congregational study.

**“I Can Trust”** — Daniel Webster Davis

**I can not see why trials come,
And sorrows follow thick and fast;
I can not fathom His designs,
Nor why my pleasures can not last,
Nor why my hopes so soon are dust,
But, I can trust.**

**When darkest clouds my sky o’er hang,
And sadness seems to fill the land,
I calmly trust His promise sweet,
And cling to His ne’er failing hand,
And, in life’s darkest hour, I’ll just
Look up and trust.**

**I know my life with Him is safe,
And all things still must work for good
To those who love and serve our God,
And lean on Him as children should,
Though hopes and decay and turn to dust,
I still will trust.**

**For further reflection:**
**“Don’t blow off another’s candle for it won’t make yours shine brighter.”**

― Jaachynma N.E. Agu

**“Not everybody can be famous but everybody can be great, because greatness is determined by service.”**  ― Martin Luther King Jr.

**“Until you’re ready to look foolish, you’ll never have the possibility of being great.”**

― Cher

A preaching commentary on this text (with works cited) is at <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/sermon-seeds/>.

The Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay, Minister for Worship and Theology (lindsayc@ucc.org), also serves a local church pastor and worship scholar-practitioner with a particular interest in the proclamation of the word in gathered communities. You’re invited to share your reflections on this text in the comments below this post on our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/SermonSeeds>.

About Weekly Seeds

Weekly Seeds is a United Church of Christ resource for Bible study based on the readings of the “Lectionary,” a plan for weekly Bible readings in public worship used in Protestant, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches throughout the world. When we pray with and study the Bible using the Lectionary, we are praying and studying with millions of others.