

On top of the turkey and the official beginning to the Christmas crazy, this week also brought with it a pop culture moment that has been years and years in the making, one that folks have been waiting for with baited breath. Not Wicked: For Good. Not Zootopia 2. Not Chiefs/Cowboys. No, this week brought us the premier of Stranger Things season five, the final season. Now, even if you know nothing about this show, you have probably seen it somewhere, be it in promos for EGGO waffles or Burger King's Stranger Things Whopper. Maybe it's that you've seen that Millie Bobby Brown, one of the main stars of the show, is now married and has adopted a baby with Jon Bon Jovi's son. Somehow, some way, you have probably seen *something* about this show.

Now, there are a lot of science fiction technicalities that go in to the general gist of the plot and we're not going to get into all of that, but here's the one thing that you need to know. In the world of Stranger Things, there is the regular world, the reality that we live in on a day to day basis, and then there is the Upside-Down, a mirror world, a flip side of our reality where things are just a smidge off. Ok, smidge is an understatement, things are *a lot* off. There are monsters and demons and creepy crawlies that have the ability to get into our world and steal people away into this other world. The Upside Down is recognizable when you're there, but you're also aware that

something isn't the same, something is fantastically different. What happens in one world can impact the other and vice versa. It is overrun with environmental changes and disasters and yet it is also frozen in time, the moment it was created encapsulated forever. It's all very complicated and weird, but suffice it to say, the Upside Down is number one, not any place you want to be, and number two, is a place where everything you know and understand about the world is, well, upside down.

Now, go with me here, but the world that Isaiah describes in this, the beginning of his prophetic life, is one quite akin to the Upside Down, except that, his upside down world is the one you want to get to, and the one his people are currently living in is the one that is best to be avoided. In our first lesson today, we come into Isaiah's life and ministry *very* early on in. We haven't even heard his call story yet, but we just dive in to what one of his first messages to God's people says. Isaiah is operating in a pre-exile world, particularly within the Southern Kingdom, otherwise known as Judah. This is during a time when the Promised Land is split into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, each ruled by their own kings and defined by their own people and tribes. The Southern Kingdom is smaller but is home to Jerusalem and thus has a particularly big stake in how their relationship with God goes, and at this current moment in time, things

between God and God's people are vibing well, but Isaiah wants them to see that things could be and *would be* even more than they could imagine.

For a little bit of context, the reigning world power at this time is Assyria and they are striving to march across what we would know as the Middle East in order to join their kingdom to Egypt. They would ransack capitals and disperse the peoples they conquered to different areas as cheap labor. Judah's people have been lucky...a civil war broke out in Assyria right around the time that Jerusalem was next on their list and their army had to return home. Judah's people saw this as a blessing from God, God had spared them and they were in a period of rejoicing. Isaiah's prophecy reflects this feeling of relief and joy, but Isaiah wants to push the people even further. He's basically saying, you think things are good now? Just wait until God comes in and turns the world upside down.

The image that Isaiah presents is one that seems like an image of the world that is only possible if seen through rose-colored glasses, one that is only possible in our imaginations, but not something actually attainable. Isaiah tells God's people that there will come a time when Jerusalem will become the center of the world, that all people, from every nation will flock to God's mountain with the sole purpose of worship and praise. People will have the *desire* to learn God's ways, they will *want* to walk along the path

God has laid before them. Then to top everything off they also won't want to learn the ways of war anymore, to the point that they will take their weapons of war and turn them into tools of abundance, tools of gardening. Swords will become plowshares, spears will becoming pruning hooks. This will be a world that is entirely unrecognizable because the people who will be flooding Jerusalem? They will include the Assyrians. People that they are trying to fend off and ward against will be welcomed in because all will have a seat at God's table, all will want to worship and learn God's ways. This is not only a world turned upside down, for Isaiah's audience this sounds like a world gone mad. What do you mean we won't have to worry about war anymore? What do you mean that our enemies will become our neighbors at the table? What do you mean *all people* will want to learn from our God and walk in the ways we keep trying to walk in? You have got to be kidding, because that doesn't seem possible.

And let's be honest, our reaction is pretty much the same as theirs, right? Because we know the world that these people lived in, we know the world it would turn into—one where empire after empire takes over culminating in the murder of the Messiah, and we know the world we live in now. We want to say to Isaiah, this sounds nice and all but it's a pipe dream, my guy. It doesn't seem realistic and so why get your hopes up?

Why spend all of your time daydreaming about something that just isn't possible in a world inhabited by humans? We want to point to all the ways that this didn't come true for them and all the ways it's not possible for us and say, well, let's move it along...but...let's pause a second...because we are walking into a season that the rest of the world would tell us is a pipe dream, not possible, just a delusion to make us feel better. So why should we look at Isaiah and the people of Israel during his time with skepticism? The lesson that Isaiah is calling them too, is the same that we are called to each and every day, especially in this sacred season of Advent, a season of waiting, of watching, of living in the in-between.

Just like Isaiah's community we live in the yet but not yet of God's kingdom. They had experienced overwhelming relief and joy and *yet*, Isaiah told them that the world hadn't even turned as upside down as it could. We know that we are anticipating the joy, the rush of relief of Christmas when baby Jesus breaks into the world and we hear the promises of a light that no darkness can overcome, and *yet*, we also know that this world isn't even close to what it *could* be, certainly not close to what God hopes for this world that God so lovingly crafted from nothing. Isaiah's audience knew that Assyrian wouldn't be gone forever, that their reality wasn't a permanent one and that fear was right around the corner. We know that the world we

live in is...a lot. It is full of messiness and heartbreak and violence and plenty of weapons of war that desperately need to be beaten into tools for a garden to feed the far too many hungry. We have those moments of joy and relief and restoration, but we also know that this world needs help, it needs peace, it needs hope, it needs us.

Because that's the struggle of lectionary, we don't get the rest of Isaiah's message which goes from this moment of joy, to warnings of you better turn your act around quite quickly. Ultimately, the message that God sent to God's people through Isaiah was the message that this vision of an upside down world starts with them. It starts with their relationship with God and with each other. How can the rest of the world want to flock to Jerusalem when they are barely interested in flocking down the street to the Temple? How can the rest of the world want to learn God's ways when God's own people are like, hard pass, we have other things we would rather concentrate on? How can God's peace reign throughout the world when it can't even find a foothold amongst God's chosen people? And we...we are no different...

We lament that the world around us is hurting. We long for God to turn the world upside down, but when it's pointed out to us that there are things that *we* could do to help that world turn, we're like ooo sorry, I have

other plans, and I kind of like the way the world is working for me right now, and well, I'm just so busy, I mean it's *Christmas*, this is *God's* time to do stuff, not mine, I have too many other things to do. And *that* is the crux of the yet but not yet time. We are a huge part of what makes it turn into the not yet. We are the ones who can turn weapons of hate into instruments of love. We are the ones who can walk the ways that God has given us as an example of love and grace even when the world is difficult. We are the ones that can say that our relationship with God is a priority even in the midst of the chaos and the crazy.

We aren't going to change everything. We aren't going to make the world do a full 180, BUT we can help it turn a few degrees where we are able. We cannot claim that we long for God's upside down world and then refuse to do our part to make it happen. The words of Isaiah, the words of Advent are crying out to us to live into this time. To awaken from the complacency of our lives, the doldrums of our faith and help make the Lord Jesus come and come quickly. We are the ones who can infuse the meaning of this season into the world—hope, peace, joy, love. We can do our part. Where there is hate, sow love. Where there is chaos, sow peace. Use this Advent to turn things upside down, even if the rest of the world says it's simply the stuff of TV. **AMEN!!!**