

## **Don't Believe Everything You Think**

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**Isaiah 61:1-4 and 8-11**

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*"What God is, in that God is love, is what God wants us to be."*

*- John McLeod Campbell*

There are times when I look back with shame upon things I have thought and said. At the time I thought them, I must have thought them to be true. But, as we say, with the "benefit of hindsight," I believe that my thoughts then were the product of my biases, prejudices, limited experience of the world, lack of generosity, cultural and social conditioning, the assumptions I had held so long that had calcified and, while only brittle, I mistook for strong ..... I could go on and on describing the various factors that shaped my thinking in the past, but of which I am now ashamed.

If I add to these factors the various emotions that drive my thinking, things like fear and anxiety, anger and resentment, jealousy and envy, the desire to be taken seriously, or to be thought important, or right, well my thinking in the past seems pretty unreliable. Even to me. And things I've said and done in the grip of these hardened assumptions and emotions feel especially shameful

And, of course, all of these same factors and emotions shape my thinking now. Which means that if I live long enough, there will be plenty more to be ashamed of.

Whether I find myself in a tense exchange of views with someone who is articulating a perspective on life that I find repugnant or I'm reading an essay about some large social concern, my thinking, my analysis, what I like to think of as my reason, is driven by factors that are anything but unbiased or objective. They are the product of forces and factors that have brought me to what I imagine to be "My Own Conclusions."

Of course, once I own them, once I lay claim to my thoughts as mine, I tend to consider them solid, dependable, the product of careful reasoning. And I feel perfectly entitled to express them and defend them at length.

It didn't occur to me until just a few years ago that maybe, maybe, I shouldn't believe everything I think.

Perhaps I should hold a kind of critical skepticism toward the conclusions I believe I've arrived at about... well ... pretty much everything. In fact, the more I've experimented with this skepticism, the more I have embraced a kind of agnosticism toward my own thinking, even (especially) toward my most passionately held positions and opinions.

And, along the way, I have discovered the most wonderful liberation in uttering three words, "I don't know."

So what in the world does “Not believing everything we think” have to do with this gorgeous passage of scripture from Isaiah chapter sixty-one?

As it turns out: quite a lot.

The people who in the eighth century BC went into those years of captivity and exile were not the same people who came out. Well, that’s just historically true, of course, because generations died and new generations were born during the exile. But in an even deeper sense, the people of Israel, the Jewish people, who emerged from the cultural displacement and social dislocation and religious ungroundedness of the exile thought very differently from the people who were carted away from their homes in Judaea and Israel.

As I mentioned last week, God used history to transform his people. God used terrible events and losses to mold and reshape his people. And a key aspect of the transformation they endured had to do with the way they saw the world and God.

There were the outward changes, some of which I referred to last week. The loss of the Temple in Jerusalem meant that they had to rethink the central practices of their faith. Before the exile, the center the faith of the Jewish people was in the Temple in Jerusalem where animal sacrifices were made on behalf of the nation. By the end of the exile, their practice of faith was centered in local synagogues, gathered communities, congregations where the holy scriptures were studied and prayers were offered. Rabbinical Judaism arose from these years of exile, and teachers largely displaced priests in the experience of the people.

But there were inward changes too. What previously was seen mostly as the social ethical teachings of the prophets came to be understood as an inward disposition, what we would call today, spirituality.

You might say that the justice and righteousness that Amos imagined “rolling down like a mighty rushing stream” through society came to be seen as something that flooded through the inner life of people of faith and changed their attitudes, changed their hearts, changed their behaviors, and changed their minds. Amos’ “mighty rushing stream” became John the Baptist’s symbolic cleansing in the Jordan which prefigured Jesus’s baptism of his followers in his own spirit.

With the exile in the rear-view mirror, the people listened to the words of the prophet we often call “The Third Isaiah,” the prophet who gave us this last small section of the Book of Isaiah, and the people began to imagine what it might mean for his words to apply to them personally.

*The Spirit of the Lord has come upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, to have something positive to say to the poor. The Lord has sent me to bandage the broken-hearted, to declare freedom to captives of all sorts, and to release from their darkness everyone held as prisoners, to comfort all who grieve, and to rebuild what was destroyed.*

This message isn’t all that far from the commandments that Israel had been given in the time of Moses, the commandments that had been carved into stone, but these commandments were

no longer simply external. They had become internal motivations, as Jeremiah the prophet had said, they were now carved in the soft flesh of the hearts of the people.

You can't change the behavior of the unmotivated. And, as we all know, nothing merely external has the power to motivate. Coerce, maybe, but not motivate. Motivation happens inside.

When I took my first preaching courses in college (I think in 1974 or so), we were instructed to bring every sermon home with a clear application. Focus the general teaching of the passage from the Bible on one or two specific examples.

I'm not going to do that today. I'll leave it to you to apply these meditations on Isaiah.

Instead, I leave us with something to chew on, just a question really.

What might it mean for us to pause in the midst of what we usually call our "Thinking," and before rushing to "Believe what we think," allow ourselves to ask, "Where might the Spirit of God challenge my thinking?" If we are brave enough, we might even pray asking God to help us to be just a little more skeptical toward the thoughts and views and opinions we carry. We might even find that a little agnosticism goes a long way in the maturing of our faith.

For that to work, however, our minds must be open, our hearts softened, to receive an insight that might challenge a long-settled assumption or two — or three hundred. The Spirit of God is the only reality I know of who can really change our thinking for the better, and make our thoughts worth believing. Somehow the tiny fingers of God's Spirit can open up the cracks in our hardened hearts, to show us how to listen and to learn from voices and places that do not just reinforce our preferences and assumptions.

This is hard work. It's not work for the faint hearted. But it holds the most wonderful promise of which Isaiah also speaks in this passage: *"Instead of your shame, you will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace, you will rejoice in your inheritance. And so you will inherit a double portion in your land, and everlasting joy will be yours."*

Amen.