Isaiah takes pride of place among the Hebrew prophets. First of the writing prophets, most quoted in the New Testament, along with Deuteronomy and the Psalms. It’s a big book, full of promises, judgment, songs of peace, songs of anger, songs of hope. Now, Isaiah is an odd book, too. In the Thirteenth Century, it was divided into the sixty-six chapters we use today. Whether by coincidence or design our bibles themselves are divided into sixty-six books. Hmmm!

The Old Testament has thirty-nine books, the New Testament twenty-seven. The Book of the Prophet divides neatly into two sections, just here after chapter thirty-nine, what some scholars call First and Second Isaiah. Hmmmm.

Now, The First Isaiah, if you will, is the record of the Prophet as he counsels the former kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and good old Hezekiah. All the songs, all the stories, all the prophecy in chapters one through thirty-nine deal with that particular time, that religious and political situation.

In chapter forty, something new happens. It’s like a big key change in a song, a new movement in a symphony, a new chapter in the story. It’s not the language that’s so different, although that’s part of it. It’s the situation. Isaiah the prophet counseled king and country in the face of two monstrous threats: The Assyrian Empire on the outside, and false gods, idols, greed and injustice on the inside.

In chapter forty, it’s a whole new world. Hezekiah and the last kings of Judah are long dead. Their capital city of Jerusalem is fallen, its walls and towers fallen into rubble. Their temple of Yahweh, the visible presence of God on earth, is destroyed, their priests slain, their people killed by sword or disease or starvation, or taken away as exiles into a foreign land. Their promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey, promised to their father Abraham, delivered by the strong right hand of the Lord by his servant Moses, conquered by Joshua, ruled by heroic judges and glorious kings David Solomon…all of it gone. All flesh is like grass. All burned up. All dust in the wind.

Psalm 137 is a song a lament from just this time:

By the rivers of Babylon

there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth,

saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’

How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

If you’ve ever seen Godspell, the song Judas sings near the end of the play is based upon this very psalm, in all its sorrow and grief and loss. It’s a tear jerker, let me tell you! But not all was lost. The prophet Ezekiel was taken to Babylon as well, and although he was a strange character, his visions gave the people some assurance that God had not abandoned them completely. In Babylon, against all odds, the Jewish Exiles prospered. Daniel and his peers, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Mordecai and his niece the queen Esther by their courage, loyalty and wisdom showed everyone from Nebuchadnezzar the king to the loneliest exile, that God is faithful, and powerful still to save those who called on the name of the Lord.

For seventy years they dwelt in exile, dreaming of their homeland, adapting to new challenges. They had no temple, so they developed synagogues, local congregations that gathered on the Sabbath to pray, to sing, to read the Word of God. They had no army of priests anymore, so they developed rabbis and other leaders to keep the faith, to teach the children, to counsel the elders, to circumcise the young, to bury their dead in foreign soil.

They had no visible presence of God, no king nor temple, so they collected the stories, the law and the writings, everything they considered “the Word of the Lord,” and in exile, in Babylon, the Hebrew bible, the Old Testament we cherish in our bibles, it was first assembled on the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates. They read the words of God together, they meditated on the promises of a faithful God, and they waited for the day of exile’s end.

And after seventy years, the day finally drew near. Its herald was this new voice, this new prophet, this new Word of God, who sang in the language, in the meter, in the key of Isaiah, the prophet of Judah. But the Prophet’s message was new, fresh, different, and it was RIGHT NOW.

Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight – in the DESERT – a highway for our God. In Babylon, in Mesopotamia, in Iraq as we know it today, there is desert everywhere, isn’t there? But the only desert the Jewish exiles cared about, the only desert that meant anything to them was the desert that separated them from Jerusalem, the trackless, empty waste their defeated grandparents had crossed leaving a trail of blood, tears, and despair. Make a highway for our God! Hallelujah! The time of exile is come to an end. The day of our returning, the day of our redemption, the day of salvation is upon us!

That is Gospel to those exiled on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates, a long, long time ago, in a land far, far from home.

But we do not live in a foreign land. We live in the home of our ancestors – most of us, anyway. We are NOT exiles, we are natives, now at least. We are home. But the world is changing, isn’t it? America has always been a violent place, to an extent – we cherish liberty over security, as well we should, but there’s a price we pay. We welcome people from all over the world – from all different religions, races, creeds. Because we value liberty over security. If we want to be the land of the free, we HAVE to be home of the brave. You can’t have it both ways. We know this.

But many of you have probably heard the people talking –horrified by mass shooting after mass shooting. It just keeps coming. It’s like we might get used to this, like sudden death may become the new normal. Everyone’s got an opinion – It’s the guns. It’s the terrorists. It’s the Muslims. It’s poor mental health care options. It’s a MESS alright, and it’s not going away. A New York Daily News front page made a point the other day – they favor gun control, as you can see, but the point is valid no matter what your opinion on that – saying ‘Our prayers are with the families,’ when you have the power to help the families – that just isn’t enough.

But DO we have any power? Is there power in politics – government as divided and deadlocked as it is. It’s not the power of more guns and ammo – we’re loaded for bear already, and America spends more on defense than any other country. To say we need more bombs, more guns, more boots on the ground…. we’ve tried all that. We’ve poured our blood and treasure into the very desert the bible talks about, and the way is still crooked, the mountains still high, the valley still low.

But listen: The Exiles triumphed. They returned, they rebuilt, they endured, not because of their laws, nor their weapons or armies, but because of their ideas. Their ideas stemming from their faith, their hope and courage. Their ideas won out.

This is important because terrorism is an idea, it’s not a country, it’s not a nation, it’s not a place we can go bomb into the stone age. It’s an idea – a religious idea, in the case of the last two mass shootings – one by a deranged Christian, and one by a ‘radicalized’ pair of Muslim Americans. There’s no denying it, they were religiously motivated. And you cannot kill religions by bombing them, or banning them, or registering them. Not even the Romans, with their murderous crucifixions, could stop Christianity from overwhelming the old gods of Rome. Was it because God was tougher than Roman gods? Stronger? Or were Christian ideas better than pagan Roman ideas? Yes, Christianity won out because it had better ideas. Stronger ideas. Healthier, life-giving ideas of love, faith and hope. That’s how it conquered.

So beloved, the way forward is clear. Just as the Jews in exile overcame their sorrow and loss by adapting their faith in new creative ways, by thinking it through, by practicing a better faith, a better idea, a deeper tradition than their Babylonian neighbors. They should have abandoned Yahweh to the dust heap of conquered gods of the past. But they adapted. Lose the temple? Fine, we’ll gather at synagogue. Lose our king? Fine, we’ll work with any government. Lose our priests? Fine, we’ll raise up rabbis by God’s grace. Lose our homes and land? We’ll worship God in a new place, a strange place, and wait for God to deliver us. We will overcome. And they did.

In such a way must we adapt. We have to live lives stronger than those who have no hope. We have to live lives deeper than those driven to violent despair. We have to live lives with more courage, more resilience, more power than those who threaten us. They may in fact change our way of life – but that’s okay, because our way of life MUST CHANGE! The world around us changing, and the old answers to the persistent problems facing us no longer work!

We can abandon our old ways, our old faith, our old religion, creed, and traditions, or we can adapt those ancient ways to overcome the new challenges. We can go deeper, stronger, and more courageous. We are at war, don’t doubt it, but it’s a war of ideas, not nations. There are guns and bombs, sure there are, but it’s the ideas behind the violence that matters. Conquer the ideas, the violence will end. Try to answer the violence with more violence, leaving the bad ideas to fester and grow, and there will be no end to escalating violence.

We see a better way forward. We see better ideas springing from better faith, better conviction, better hope. We DON’T just pray for change. We THINK it through, with the minds and courage God gave us. And we will overcome. The way WILL be prepared in the wilderness, the highway for our God. It will be a highway paved with new ideas, springing from old notions of love, faith, and hope. It will be new practices, new ways of doing things that will reflect our ancient faith in the God of New Life, of new hope. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. Let’s take that word, re-inscribe it onto our hearts and minds, and change our bleeding, chaotic and fear-filled world for the better.

**Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him; behold his reward is with him, and his work before him.**

There is work before him. It is ours to take hold of. Ours to take part in. Ours to accomplish, with God’s help. What can one person do? Little. But we are many, and together we are mighty. We can overcome by taking increased devotion to that cause for which our ancestors sacrificed so much. We can overcome by adapting this ancient faith into new ways and new ideas, so all our people might prosper in this good land, and never see exile, never see despair. The power of God, the enduring word of the Lord shall be our guide, and as we change our lives to reflect that powerful word, we shall overcome. No weapon formed against us shall prosper. No idea filled with violence and hatred and fear and death shall overcome it.

That is the work before us. That’s the promise to God’s people of THIS DAY, of THIS HOUR. Hold fast to the life affirming faith entrusted to you. Hold it, squeeze it until the juice of new ideas, better ideas flow out of it. Hold it tightly until streams of living water flow. We have the answer to the violent ideas of this world. It’s right here before us, inside of us, latent but powerful nonetheless. May it take root in all of us. May it renew our hearts. May we in turn renew the face of the earth. Then truly shall the glory of the Lord be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.