

Haftarah

'the one who created the heavens'



*Thus says the Eternal God,
the One who created the heavens
and stretched them out,
who made the earth
and all that grows in it,
who gives breath to its people
and spirit to all who walk on it.*

Isaiah 42:5

Connection

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Isaiah 42:5—43:10) accompanies the Torah portion *Bereshit* ('Beginnings'): Genesis 1:1-6:8.
- Genesis opens with the creation of the world. So too does the Haftarah.
- God is magnificently creative, not only bringing forth heaven and earth, but also the people of Israel.

Background

- Our Haftarah passage today comes from that part of the bible known as 'Second Isaiah' (chapters 40-55). It is attributed to an unknown prophet of the sixth century BCE, dwelling in Babylon where the Israelites had been exiled following the fall of the Temple in 586 BCE.
- In 539 BCE Cyrus, king of Persia, overpowered Babylon and allowed the Jews to leave. Thus Second Isaiah perceives Cyrus as an instrument of the Lord's mercy.
- As the period of exile draws to an end, and release from captivity appears imminent, the prophet speaks of the promise of deliverance. His people have suffered much, but the power of Lord prevails and will soon be seen in a new exodus. Just as the Israelites were once delivered from Egypt, they will soon be led out of Babylon to return to their homeland.

Themes

- Israel's birth is linked to the birth of the universe. Israel's chosenness by God entails a responsibility: to be 'a light to the nations,' 'to open eyes that are blind,' to free captives (42:6-7).
- Israel's chosenness—and the Lord's works connected with it—are cause for jubilant praise. The whole earth 'sings a new song'. The seas roar, the wilderness rejoices. Villagers 'shout from the mountain tops!' (42:11).
- Note the vivid imagery. The Lord is described as a soldier who charges out into battle roaring at his foe (42:13), then again like a woman in labor who cries out, pants, gasps as new life is brought forth (42:14).
- The Lord's message is demanding, challenging. It calls for change and conversion of heart/lifestyle. 'Who among you will listen to this?' (42:23). Yet it is ultimately reassuring, hopefilled. 'Have no fear I will redeem you; I have called you by name, you are Mine' (43:1).

Reflection

- *The birth of the universe... the birth of a people...*
Reflect on this parallel, and on the Lord's creativity in your own life.

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Harper Collins Study Bible: NRSV (NY, 1993). Scripture quotations: Plaut.