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I'm not quite sure how I arrived here, but your pastor invited me to speak with you today. He suggested I might have some helpful words for you, though I'm not quite sure how my experiences from 2500 years ago could have an impact on you today.

My name is Isaiah, who you know from one of the books of the prophets in your Bible. Much of what is written there were words I had spoken, but the latter portions of the book were words spoken by others many years after I had died. I am flattered that my words had such impact on our people that others continued to write in my name, adding authority to their own words. Although the last two sections of the book named after me were written in a historical period about events that happened after I died, they do reflect my understanding of God—how God loves us and seeks us, even in the midst of the chaos of the world struggles.

Let me first tell you about my life. I was a counselor, or what you might call an advisor, in the king's court. Over the years I had worked with several kings, from King Uzziah to King Ahaz. I

spoke with politicians and priests alike, trying to advise the king on the best actions to take in regard to our neighboring nations.

King Uzziah became king when he was only 16 years old, and he reigned for 52 years and had been quite successful. He had repaired the defenses in Jerusalem by building watch towers, reorganized the army, and secured many trade routes through our land. He also loved the soil and encouraged the building of cisterns to collect water for vineyards and crops. When he died, our country went into deep mourning, saddened by the loss of such a great leader.

As it always happens, some tried to find reasons why he had died; in the Book of Chronicles in your Bible one writer offered an explanation. The writer remembered the time the king had gone to the temple and had wanted to make an offering. Since this was the priests' job, some believed the king had become proud and arrogant. As a result, some suggested the king contracted a skin disease and became ill.<sup>1</sup> I know your medical sciences today

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would find other explanations for skin diseases and death, but in my day we often looked at people's behaviors and tried to blame individuals for bad things that happened.

I think you can tell that life was complicated in my day. Even though this king had done a wonderful job, his reign ended with a scandal.

It was in the year of King Uzziah's death that I received my vision from God, which you heard read this morning. I saw the Lord sitting on a throne. Winged creatures were his attendants and were praising God. The floor seemed to shake, and smoke filled the room. Needless to say, I was scared to death! I cried out that I was not good enough to be in the presence of God, and that I couldn't find the words to speak to the corrupt leaders of our nation.

In my vision an angel touched a hot coal to my lips, burning away any impurities so I could speak. Just then I heard a voice asking all of us gathered who would go and speak to the people. Without thinking I raised my hand and said, "I'll go; send

me." Had I known the job description, I think I would have kept my mouth shut, for I had no idea that I would be speaking harsh words of judgment in coming years.

One of the later oral traditions said that God told me, "If you can stand the hostility and insults of my people then you will be my prophet. If you cannot bear their rage then tell me now and I will seek another prophet."<sup>2</sup>

Maybe I should have bowed out then, but I was foolish enough to think that I could bring God's words to the leaders of our day and they would listen. My first assignment from God was to say to the leaders, "Listen hard, but you aren't going to get it; look hard, but you won't catch on."<sup>3</sup> What kind of message is that? Then I heard God say,

Make these people blockheads, with fingers in their ears and blindfolds on their eyes, so they won't see a thing, won't hear a word, so they won't have a clue about what's going on and, yes, so they won't turn around and be made whole.<sup>4</sup>

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That was a strange message! I thought I was to bring words to help the leaders hear God, but God was saying that they would not hear me.

After King Uzziah died, his son ruled for a short period, and then King Ahaz began as king. This was a most difficult time in our history, for this king did not follow God's ways, and he began mixing our traditions with the ways of others. When King Ahaz wanted to form an alliance with the Assyrians, I warned him that this was dangerous, that they were just using us. The king ignored my advice, and I walked out of the court, never to return again. When the Assyrians attacked our land, it was hard for me not to say, "I told you so." People were suffering during this terrible war, so I brought words of hope to them, some of which you still read today in your Bible. I told them how God would bring them a sign: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel,"<sup>5</sup> a name which means "God is with us."

I hoped that every time a young woman gave birth to a child, people would see hope being born;

even when sons were dying in war, new children were born to carry on the future. It's wonderful that you read these words as you wait for the birth of Jesus during Advent, which will soon be here. The followers of Jesus called him Immanuel and saw his birth as a sign of hope from God. We needed hope in my day, and I have observed that you need hope today as well.

I have been watching your media this past week, and I know it's been a difficult week for you. Many people waited in long lines to vote for the next President of your nation. Some were disappointed in the final outcome, while others were thrilled. I am surprised to see protests across your nation, rebelling against the leader you have selected. Your future remains uncertain, just as our future seem precarious. We didn't know how our lives would change when new kings came to power, especially when they didn't seem to follow God's ways.

No matter the outcome of the decision for your leader, you must remember that God remains a constant presence in your world. No matter how

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uncertain things appear, God is with you through it all.

There seems to always be a conflict going on somewhere in the world, a place far larger than we ever imagined in my day. We only knew of the struggles within our small geographic range, for we had no mass media to bring tragic stories into our homes. I don't know how you cope with so much information, how you find hope in all the fighting and terror. If I lived today, I'm not sure what I would

say—except maybe the same thing I said thousands of years ago: Immanuel, God is with us.

God called me to bring this message to a people who were struggling to understand the suffering they faced. Maybe God has called you to bring the same message. I certainly hope some of you will hear God prompting you to bring hopeful news into your world. Even when you find yourself facing those who don't want to listen, keep speaking God's hopeful words. And remember—God is with you too.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Chronicles 26

<sup>2</sup> Sefer Ha-Aggadah 477.82 as quoted in *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible*, vol. 6, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 6:9, *The Message Bible*

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 6:10, *The Message Bible*

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 7:14, NRSV