



VOICES **JANIE B. CHEANEY**

## A promised child

How do you solve a problem like humanity?

**READING ISAIAH IS LIKE** riding a yo-yo up and down. From the moment the Lord strides upon the scene, calling out His grievance to heaven and earth, the mood changes almost midsentence from righteous judgment to gracious reconciliation: “Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.”

Ah, sinful nation, sick, desolate, ruined. These are the judgments of the Lord, but also the natural consequences of cutting themselves off from the very Creator who put the breath in their bodies. That breath remains, and not only commits Israel to Him but commits Him to Israel. He has bound Himself to them.

And that’s the problem: By the end of the first four chapters a personality emerges that—I say with respect—a psychiatrist might label schizophrenic. Fierce condemnation alternates with brief passages of apparent reconsideration: “Come, let us reason together.”

But the weight of sin and rebellion drags the oracle down, down, down, even as it struggles to rise. The case against “my people” is accurate and detailed and could apply to “our people” today. And if anyone complains about His peevishness, vindictiveness, and arbitrariness, here’s His answer:

*The Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows Himself holy in righteousness.*

He can’t be holy and righteous without judging. And He can’t judge without holiness and righteousness. As the rock-ribbed Calvinist would say, He has every right

to send all of them to hell. *There is none righteous; no, not one.*

But He has committed Himself, by His very breath. What to do?

Speaking in human terms, this is the Divine Dilemma. Every parent with wayward children can sympathize. You don’t stop loving them—unless you never really loved them in the first place. If you saw your kids as an extension of yourself who betrayed you by their bad behavior, it might not be so hard to cut them off: *Sayonara, punk. You had your chance, and you blew it.*

But if there’s even a smidgen of love in your complicated feelings, there’s at least that much pain. Love is risk. It’s opening oneself to admit the unknown; a being that brings its own complexity, hidden dangers, and uncertain future. Hard enough for a parent when that child turns on you. But what do you do ... if You are God?

Two choices: One, You give up. Let the heedless children destroy Your house, trample Your rules, leave Your righteousness in tatters. In the process they choke on their own autonomy and You cease to be righteous and no longer God. They’ve squandered their identity and stolen Yours. Nobody wins.

Two: You exercise Your righteous judgment, stop the oppression, punish the oppressors. You are still God, but Your creation is stuck in an endless round of destruction and renewal (see the book of Judges) until it exhausts itself. You win—but not really, if Your grand experiment fails and the fiery hallways of hell ring with Satan’s laughter.

But wait—there’s a third option.

*For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.*

Higher critics say that this child is a contemporary born into the royal household, a brief uptick in the nation’s downward drift. But the extravagant language—mighty God, everlasting Father, etc.—is a bit much, even for court flattery. The child the virgin conceives may be the son of a virtuous young woman of Isaiah’s time. But there’s another child, another sign given to a later virgin who wonders, “How can this be?”

Tucked among the agonized and wrathful pronouncements, not only against Mt. Zion but against all surrounding nations, a Man emerges. A promised child, like Isaac and Samson; a sapling from the seed of Jesse like David; a servant and prophet like Moses; a sacrificial victim like ... no one else. He’s the resolution of an impossible dilemma and the reconciler of opposites. As a former pastor used to say, “What a Christ!”

Amen. ■