

## THE PROPHET'S DILEMMA

Sermon preached by The Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

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A colleague in ministry is in the midst of a sermon series entitled, "Smitten by the Old Testament." Over the course of the summer, he has chosen to preach on Old Testament texts that rarely find their way into Sunday morning worship. He has taken to soliciting his congregation for favorite, obtuse passages via Facebook, posting on Saturday morning a question for the next day. By the afternoon, he usually has over 20 comments from parishioners, some serious, some in jest, noting the more curious laws, prohibitions and shalt-nots that dot the landscape of the Hebrew Bible. His intention in preaching this series is to take his congregation on a journey to read and interpret portions of the Old Testament with renewed appreciation for and fidelity to the text.

Over the next few weeks, we will be embarking on a similar journey, as we consider the words of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. It's a short trip, and we'll have to pass quickly by beautiful scenery and unforgettable landmarks, but we will stop and linger in places less familiar, taking the opportunity to explore the truck stops and dusty back roads of the landscape.

In his singular work, *The Prophets*, Abraham Joshua Heschel defines the prophet in this way, "A prophet is a person, not a microphone. He [sic] is endowed with a mission, with the power of a word not his own that accounts for his greatness... The prophet feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon the prophet's soul... prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world... God is raging in the prophet's words." "Prophetic utterance," Heschel continues, "is rarely cryptic; it is urging, alarming, forcing onward, as if the words gushed forth from the heart of God, seeking entrance to the heart and mind of [the people]... The language [of prophecy] in the Old Testament is "luminous and explosive, firm and contingent, harsh and compassionate, a fusion of contradictions."<sup>1</sup>

This fusion of contradictions between the extremes of damnation and love is the prophet's dilemma- The prophet is called to bring a message from and to bear witness to a powerful and righteous God who desires just living, unqualified devotion, and sincere worship from a people who more often than not demonstrate just the opposite- unjust living, fickle devotion, and self-serving worship. The prophet is called to bring the people to account for their actions, offering the promises of God's redemption, tempered with the harsh reality of judgment if they do not.

This morning, we meet Isaiah, not the earliest prophet, nor the latest, but maybe the best known of his biblical brothers and sisters.

The Book of the Bible known as Isaiah represents the oracles of a number of individuals, beginning with the originating Isaiah, who prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah during the eighth century BC. Chapters 1-39 are generally attributed to the eponymous prophet, addressing the community of Jerusalem. Believing that God founded the city of Jerusalem, lived in it, and would ultimately save it, Isaiah railed against the people who morally defiled God's

holy dwelling place. Isaiah's speech is at once vitriolic and compassionate, equal parts judgment and restoration, censure and hope. Isaiah follows in the footsteps of his Northern Kingdom counterparts, Amos and Hosea, in a harsh tradition of castigation that has nonetheless stood the test of time and entered our biblical canon.

For the modern ear, the prophet's fiery discourses are unappetizing, squeamish and unnecessary. The muck-raking does not, at first read, inspire a change of heart, but rather a change of page. Let's just skip over the rude verdict against the degenerate city and the judgments on arrogance and oppression. Let's rather stick with the Isaiah who foreshadows the coming Messiah and the hope of the people- the shoot that shall come out from the stump of Jesse... upon whom will rest the spirit of the Lord... the spirit of wisdom and understanding..." Or, the description of the peaceable kingdom that we know and love so well, where the wolf lies with the lamb and the leopard with the kid, and the little child shall lead them. Or, from chapter 9, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness- on them light has shined." These are the words of a more palatable prophet. These are words of comfort and assurance to guide us through the dark night of the soul, through individual and collective struggles when God seems far off. We desire the prophet with the direct line to God who can tell us that everything will be OK, that God's mercy is greater than our sin, that we won't, finally, be held accountable for all the ways we have screwed things up.

But like it or not, more often than not, the prophet must, on divine command, bring a message that the people- that we- do not want to hear; the prophet bears the message of peace alongside the message of judgment. Restoration is promised, but only to those who welcome a change of heart and behavior; God will not reside in a holy city that has become a moral slum. Isaiah's message in the verses we heard today describes a morally defiled Jerusalem; so utterly have the people abandoned true devotion to God that they resemble the infamously debauched cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Biblical record has preserved for us Isaiah's scathing damnations of those who have turned from sincere worship and have twisted the practices of faith into an unrecognizable form, something ugly and vicious, immodest and self-congratulatory.

Yet even in this small handful of verses, the prophet's dilemma is apparent, as Isaiah holds in tension the reality of a God who is disappointed and angry with the behavior of God's beloved children, and a God who abounds in steadfast love and mercy, and who finds every legal loophole to let the people off the hook. In the final verses of today's passage, Isaiah shares with Jerusalem God's desire to make things right, "Come now, let us argue it out... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Isaiah presents the contradiction and then resolves it, promising the hoped-for restoration if the people will only listen and obey. Like any good suspenseful drama, we hold our breaths for the outcome. Isaiah stands in the center of the whirling vortex, straddling the immense gulf that sometimes opens between God and humanity, when we have lost our sense of direction and forgotten how to be in the presence of the one who Created us and desires the best for us. Who, in their right mind, would sign up for such a gig? Torn between two loyalties, caught in the midst of so great a lovers' quarrel. Only one called by God, plucked from our midst to carry a holy

message, to offer a sharp word and compassionate heart, to bear God's love in one direction and our contrite hearts in the other.

We are unlikely to find a modern-day Isaiah in our midst, at least not one that we would listen to with any seriousness. The airwaves are clogged with so many voices; it has become easy to tune out the ones we'd rather not hear, or the ones un-vetted by history and untouched by God's call. Even so, there are figures in popular culture that have received the title of prophet by historical record and the witness of their lives- Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr.- and other figures whose prophecy is more of a church-without-borders variety, the self-help version of a prophet- Joel Osteen, Jim Wallis- or the self-proclaimed prophet of a political variety- Glen Beck, Bill O'Reilly. Yet as a community of faith, we are in need as much as we ever were for a voice of clarity and moral character; leaders who can, with compassion and force, lead us on a straight path, and hold a mirror up for us to see the way that God sees us, beloved and troubled.

Kellie Anderson-Picallo, former member of this church, newly ordained minister, and our guest preacher from last week, has accepted a unique call to the ministry. Instead of entering parish ministry, Kellie accepted a call to Auburn Media, a new branch of Auburn Theological Seminary. Kellie's job is to provide media training to progressive religious leaders carrying a prophetic message- to ready their voices for the sound byte and the rotation of cable news shows and blogs and newspapers. In essence, Kellie is a prophet-trainer. The staff at Auburn Media equip the modern day prophet with the tools to proclaim a message of justice and faith to an audience of millions in milliseconds; prophetic utterance by way of satellites and streaming video and wifi, heard in every airport, coffee shop, and home office in the world.<sup>2</sup>

It is a noble endeavor, and a tenuous one. For what remains to be seen is how we, as God's people, will respond. Will we hear the prophetic message? Will we be willing to make radical changes that respond to a critique that we are often more about ourselves and our own comfort than we are about the needs of others? Or will we be obstinate, putting off the hard work for another day, when life isn't so complicated and our resources not so scarce?

At the end of the parable in Luke's Gospel that we heard this morning, Jesus warns us to be ready. We must be prepared for the coming reign of Christ in our midst; we must be dressed for action and have our lamps lit; we must have our houses in order. We must be willing to account for our actions in the here and now, not in some distant future. We must be a prophetic people today.

One example of a way in which we at the First Presbyterian Church are called to prophetic ministry is our work with the homeless of our city. Today is Homelessness/Affordable Housing Sunday in the Presbyterian calendar, an opportunity to think about the ways in which we are being prophetic on behalf of the least in our community. The most recent newsletter from the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing described the urgency of the situation: "Affordable housing advocates are on their way to Albany [this week] to stem the loss of affordable housing and advocate for the rights over 1 million New Yorker renter households. With nearly 40,000 New Yorkers in shelters seeking affordable housing and fully one third of New York Renter households paying more than half of their income in rent - the ability to live in

dignity and security for over one million New Yorkers hangs in the balance.”<sup>3</sup> The Interfaith Assembly speaks prophetically for those who are homeless or residing in substandard housing. How might we respond prophetically?

This is our dilemma. Are we willing to be a prophetic church today? Are we willing to prioritize justice? Are we willing to hear and respond to the cry of the needy, even when we are exhausted and overextended and in need of rest?

William Sloane Coffin, preacher, pastor, theologian and prophet of the twentieth century, declared Jesus a “prophet to the nations” much like the prophet Isaiah. “While he walked the earth, Jesus delivered people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, suppurating wounds, deformity, and muteness. But again and again in word and deed he returned to the plight of the poor, whose poverty, in true prophetic fashion, he considered no historical accident, but the fruit of social injustice. What would he say and do in our hard and uncertain times, in a world of thirteen million refugees, a world one-half of whose children never so much as open their mouths to say ‘aah’ to a doctor, a world in which almost every country is robbing the poor to feed the military?”

“And would he not pronounce our own nation a greedy disgrace?” Coffin concludes, “Only spiritual deafness can prevent our hearing the voice of God in the clamor of the cities.”<sup>4</sup>

Isaiah and Jesus and William Sloane Coffin address the faith community about preparation, about the linkage of the present age to the future one, of cause and effect, of action and consequence, of the myth of cheap grace.

According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The situation of a person immersed in the prophets’ words is one of being exposed to a ceaseless shattering of indifference, and one needs a skull of stone to remain callous to such blows.”<sup>5</sup> No matter how outrageous or overblown or unseemly the prophet’s message may seem, we can not help but hear it. None of us have skulls of stone, not yet - that level of indifference and callousness would mark the end of our Christian faith. But more appealing than simply admitting that our skulls are not carved from granite might be to admit that the prophet’s message has hit its mark- that regardless of how hesitant we are to take a look in the mirror that the prophet holds up for us, we desire the change that the prophet intones; we desire true restoration into God’s favor when we have fallen out of it; we know in our heart of hearts that we have not lived up to the standards of fairness and compassion and generosity that God has set for us. And we know that what Jesus said is right, that we must be dressed for action and have our lamps lit for the day soon coming when the Son of God will return. As we wait for the unexpected hour to come upon us, may we have the fortitude and faith to prepare a world fit enough for our Maker.

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1962).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.auburnseminary.org/media-training-consulting>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.iahh.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*.