

**FROM THE PULPIT OF
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

SERMON: “Isaiah: A Call to Failure?”

September 6, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Holy God, your thoughts are not our thoughts and your words are not always what we want to hear. So we pray that by the power of your Spirit you will enable us to hear what you would speak to us through your word, even when to our sinful ears it is strange and disturbing. This we ask in Christ’s name. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 6

New Testament Lesson: Mark 4:10-12

What do you make of those passages we just read? I was tempted to say, “*This is the word of the Lord?*” Strange word indeed. Now the first part of the story of Isaiah’s call by God is familiar and beloved by many of us. It is one of the classic stories of the call of God in scripture. The story often serves both as a model for experiences of the call of God, and as an outline for corporate worship. The vision of Isaiah in the temple, at a critical moment in the history of his nation, moves from a sense of the awesome holiness of God, to a confession of his own sinfulness and that of his people, to hearing God’s call and claim on his life, and his response in faith, “**Here I am; send me.**” The vision moves from adoration, to confession, to a word of address, and a response. That same order is found in many of the stories of God’s call in scripture. It is roughly the same order we follow in our worship each Sunday.

But almost every time we read the passage we stop too soon. Rarely do we read the whole story, and hear what it is that the Lord God actually calls the prophet Isaiah to say and do. As far as I can remember, in over 40 years of ministry I don’t think I’ve ever preached on the whole passage before. Not many preachers have. The words are too strange, too disturbing. We much prefer to end with Isaiah’s familiar response, “**Here am I; send me.**” We sing, most often on Youth Sundays or at services of ordination for officers or pastors,

“Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.”¹

But Isaiah is not called to anything as sentimental as “holding God’s people in his heart.” He is called to proclaim a disturbing word that shakes the very foundation of his whole ministry. The Lord says to his prophet,

“Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.”

¹ “Here I Am, Lord,” no. 525, *Presbyterian Hymnal* (words and music by Daniel Schutte, 1981)

More than a few of us who are preachers may have had that same effect on people without meaning to. But here it seems as if the prophet Isaiah is being called to utter failure. How could that be? Prophets are called to confront God's people with their sins, and to point them in hope to the promises of God's mercy, so that they may turn from their sinful ways and be saved by God. They are not called to make it *more difficult* for people to hear and respond to God's word—are they?

But the word God's speaks to Isaiah in his awesome vision of the holiness of God, shaking the foundations of the temple, seems to be the very opposite of everything that we would expect or want to hear. The words are so strange that surely Isaiah must have wondered whether he had heard God rightly. Prophets are sent to **open** people's hearts to the Lord, not prevent them from seeing and hearing and understanding and responding to God's word, aren't they?

And yet, it is clear throughout scripture that the work of those who are called to proclaim the word of the Lord often results, not in what we call "success," but in what might appear to be failure. The prophet Amos is banished from the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the king who tells him in no uncertain terms that he has "gone from preaching to meddling" in "the *king's* sanctuary." (Amos 7:12) And Jeremiah is accused of treason and thrown in a pit and deported to Egypt. And according to a late tradition, probably not historically true, Isaiah himself met a violent end as he was sawn in two. The powers-that-be do not take kindly to those who proclaim another King and another kingdom. That's why it is often the poets and prophets that totalitarian regimes seek first to silence.²

Throughout the Bible the typical fate of prophets is to be rejected and persecuted and killed, as Jesus himself makes clear. "**Woe to you!**" he declares, "**for you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed.**" (Luke 11:47) And as Jesus turns toward Jerusalem and the death that awaits him there, he laments, "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood, but you were not willing!**" (Luke 13:34)

Prophets rarely live to a ripe old age to write their memoirs. That continues to be the case in our own time: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, hanged in a Nazi prison, Oscar Romero, shot through the head while celebrating the Mass in El Salvador, Martin Luther King, Jr., gunned down on a balcony in Memphis. Those who in the name of the Lord confront entrenched power of wealth and privilege do not often fare well in a fallen world.

Whatever else we make of the strange call of Isaiah, it is true to the way things are. Prophets are rarely honored until they are safely dead and buried. During their life times they must often wonder whether all they are doing is dulling people's minds, and shutting their eyes, and stopping their ears. So time and time again they ask, with Isaiah,

² Suggested by Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 632.

“How long, O Lord?” How long am I to keep beating my head against the stone wall of your peoples’ hearts?

But it’s not just prophets who feel that way. I know more than a few ministers who wonder if anything they say ever gets through to the people they love and serve. And I know more than a few teachers who throw their heart and soul into the lessons they plan, only to be met with blank stares and deaf ears. Buz told me the other day about an article in the *Greenville News* entitled “School Off to a Good Start.” Beneath the article was a picture of a little boy with his fingers in his ears.

And how many social workers must feel the same way, as they keep beating their heads against the walls of resistance they meet, both from those they are seeking to help and from the entrenched bureaucracies with which they work? And how many parents of teen-agers wonder the same thing. **“How long, O Lord? How long?”** we, too, ask.

We will answer that in a moment, but first let us reflect on the fact that scripture suggests that God may not intend for his words to be easily understood **apart from active commitment to God’s ways of justice and mercy**. Or to put it another way—in order to **understand** the word...we must **stand under** the word. Obedience is a necessary step toward understanding. To eyes shut by long-embraced sins, to ears stopped by habitual patterns of disobedience, God’s word may make little sense at all. It is not that God actively wills that people not hear and see and understand. It is that God acknowledges what is indeed true, that the more one persists in a life of sin, the more insensitive to sin one becomes and the more deeply entangled in it.

In his great study of *The Prophets*, the Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel says that at times the divine word can have the negative effect of making even worse what people have done to their own souls. The more insensitive we become to spiritual truths, the less we are able to see or hear or understand such truths and the more spiritually deaf and blind we become. The first step toward redemption is often a realization how blind and deaf we have become.

The prophet Amos hears the Lord declare that he will send a famine on the land--not **“a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.** (Amos 8:11) “A famine of the word.”

It seems to me that describes our own time quite well--**“famine of the word.”** We, too, have shut our ears, our ears, our hearts for so long that we are no longer able to hear the word of the Lord. It is not that the Lord does not want us to turn from the sins of an increasingly dysfunctional society and be healed. It is that God does not want us to turn too quickly, too easily, too cheaply, too superficially.

The prophet Jeremiah mocks those who come to worship saying “Peace, peace,” “all is well, all is well,” without acknowledging their sinful ways. **“They have become great and rich,”** he says, **“they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in**

deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things, says the Lord.” (Jer.5:27-29)

The punishment of sin is most often, quite simply, the further increase of sin. The more insensitive we become to the voice of God, the less we are able to hear and see and understand what God is saying to us, and the worse becomes “the famine of the word” that leaves us starving inside.

“How long, O Lord?” asks Isaiah. In our more honest moments we may ask the same thing. **“How long...?”** God’s answer is even more disturbing. How long?...until the Lord no longer holds back his just judgment. **“Until cities lie waste...and the land is utterly desolate...”** Until the consequences of our guilt become inescapable and we “reap the whirlwind” of what we have sown. Sometimes, nothing else, nothing less, can open our eyes and ears, our minds and souls, to the word of the Lord that “wounds and heals, that tears down and builds up.”

Isaiah, in his profound identification with the sin of his own people, sees the coming judgment of the Lord that will leave a vast “emptiness in the midst of the land.” **“Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.”**

A devastating word of judgment--but then comes a strange little phrase, a tiny glimmer of hope, **“The holy seed is its stump.”** Even with the judgment, there will be a new beginning for the people of God. A remnant will be left to carry on the story of God’s covenant faithfulness and the work of God redeeming love in the world. In that remnant, however small it may be—and in time it would be reduced to one man hanging on a cross—in the remnant of the righteous, there is hope for the future that even now, and even in the midst of a massive “famine of the word,” God is, nevertheless, calling into being. **“The holy seed is its stump.”**

For some reason the phrase reminds me of a song recorded by Bette Midler, “The Rose,” which ends with these words,

“When the night has been too lonely and the road has been too long,
and you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong,
just remember in the winter, far beneath the winter snows,
lies the seed that with the sun's love in the spring becomes the rose.”³

But that is much too shallow and sentimental to end a sermon with, even if we were to say that the “Son’s love” is Jesus Christ. So better to stick with the words of the prophet Isaiah himself, words we hear every Advent season.

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the

³“The Rose” written by Amanda McBroom and performed by Bette Midler in the 1979 film *The Rose*.

spirit of wisdom and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.... He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:1-9)

As we give special attention over the coming months to the call of God, it is important to remember that God’s call may not be a soothing invitation to a life of comfort and ease. It may be, and often is, a disturbing call to follow in costly obedience the One who invites us eat and drink at this Table, remembering his body *broken* that we may be made whole and his life’s blood *poured out* that we may have life in all its fullness. This bread, this wine, sustain us, as long as is needed for the purposes of God to be fulfilled in our lives and in our time. To God be the glory. Amen.

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