

Aug. 11, 2019

Isaiah 1: 1-2, 7-20

Prayer: Dear God, we pray that our worship be pleasing to you. Let our worship include not just rituals but the justice you demand. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Heeding Our Prophets, Part 2

My father always thought he looked like the actor Robert Stack.

One night, Vince and I were watching television, and Robert Stack came on an infomercial. I pointed to the screen, and said, "My dad thinks he looks like Robert Stack."

Vince replied, "That is Robert Stack."

I said, "No, my dad thinks *he* looks like Robert Stack."

Vince pointed to the screen. "*He* is Robert Stack."

"NO, VINCE, my dad thinks HE looks like Robert Stack."

Vince said, "HE does look like Robert Stack because HE IS Robert Stack."

I am embarrassed to say this went on for quite some time, with me pounding the television screen more than once. Finally, I was feeling like Curly on the Three Stooges.

I said, “Listen to me. My. Dad. Thinks. My. Dad. Looks. Like. Robert. Stack.”

Vince said, “Oh, yeah, I guess he does.”

Communication can be fraught with misunderstanding. Nowhere is that more apparent than when we bring our 21st century eyes to Scriptures written in the 8th century BCE. Even when we know a bit about the historical setting, the barriers of language, culture, metaphor, poetry and manner of storytelling can stump us.

Two weeks ago, we read from a little-known prophet named Hosea who spoke of the impending doom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians. This morning we will read from the Bible’s best-known prophet, Isaiah.

We think the book of Isaiah was actually written by three different prophets writing over a period of 200 years. But today’s beginning was written by the prophet named Isaiah.

In his day, Israel was divided into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, or Israel, fell to Assyria in 722 B.C.E. But 20 years later, Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was still hanging on by its fingernails.

At the time Isaiah was writing, Assyria had come in and laid waste to Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. The kingdom didn't fall, but people were asking what they'd done wrong, why God was allowing the cruel and mighty Assyrians to threaten them this way.

Isaiah's answer was that they were making a mockery of God's law. They were enacting the rituals of worship, but they were not concerned with matters of justice and mercy.

Please turn with me to **Isaiah 1: 1-2, 7-20**. In the interest of time, we're going to skip some verses, but I think you'll get the gist.

1The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

2 Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.

(skip to verse 7)

⁷ Your country lies desolate,
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
aliens devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

⁸ And daughter Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a shelter in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.

⁹ If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we would have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

¹² When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;

¹³ bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

¹⁸ Come now, let us argue it out,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.

¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;

²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Now, ironically, all these things that God says he despises are the very things he previously commanded. Burnt offerings. Observing the Sabbath. Convocations. Religious festivals. Prayers.

He commanded the Jews to do all these things back in the Law of Moses, or the first five books of the Bible. But something has happened. And in trying to explain how Judah has fallen out of favor and is suffering raids from Assyria, Isaiah says there's something profoundly wrong underneath the religious piety. Something rotten hidden by the rituals.

God says, **“Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.”**

Isaiah is getting to the meaning behind the law. The law was enacted as a way to show love and obedience to the God of Israel. But God is accusing his people of emptiness.

They're going through the motions. They're burning sacrifices and incense and meeting in assemblies and praying and resting on the Sabbath.

But there's nothing behind it. Their gestures are empty, even evil.

“... Cease to do evil,” God commands. **“Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”**

You know, sometimes it's hard to relate the Old Testament to our lives. And sometimes it's not.

Because how many of our churches are filled with people going through the right rituals, and turning their backs on the oppressed?

How many people sit in the comfort of their homes and point fingers at those working toward justice because they're not shouting *salvation* loudly enough to suit them?

How many of our politicians and evangelists wrap themselves in the Christian flag but behave as if they've never read the first teaching of Christ?

According to Isaiah, such behavior has wearied the Lord.

Like the Jews of Isaiah's day, we have gotten into this same mindset that Christianity is about personal piety rather than societal justice.

I don't know about you but I grew up hearing about those scarlet sins washed white as snow in verse 18. And it was always in the context of my personal sin, my personal shortcomings, not the overweening injustices of my world.

I have come to believe that God cared less about my kissing a boy and more that every boy and every girl was fed and clothed and loved and nurtured.

Less about my personal salvation and more about my contribution to a just and merciful world.

Less about a future hell and more about the hell we have allowed to flourish here on earth.

“Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen,” God spoke through Isaiah. **“Your hands are full of blood.”**

Sometimes we don't know what the Old Testament is saying. And sometimes, it's as clear as the nightly news.

How dare we sing and worship and praise....

How dare we come to the Lord's table....

How dare we claim to be followers of Christ and then deny to someone the statement on the cover of our bulletin – “You are a child of God.”

Theologian Richard Rohr, whom I know many of you read, recently set forth a dozen qualities of the prophet outlined by peace activist John Dear of New Mexico. Those qualities were true in ancient Israel, and they're true now.

All prophets of the Hebrew Bible, Dear said, were concerned with one question: justice and peace. Nearly 3,000 years later, the same thing is true. If we want a spiritual life, we must work for justice and peace.

Another common denominator is the prophet is always going to run into trouble with the established religious community.

“The institution that goes by the name of God,” Dear wrote, “often turns away the prophet of God.”

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Daniel Berrigan died in 2016 – at the age of 94. There were those who thought he’d not make it to old age. Thought he’d get assassinated with the likes of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

Those of us who were around during the Vietnam War remember Daniel and his brother Philip as activist Catholic priests who burned draft files taken from a draft board office in 1968. The Berrigans were sentenced to prison for the act, and Daniel famously went underground before the FBI located him.

During his long career, he tended AIDS victims. He cared for poor people with cancer. And he spoke out against every war and conflict the United States engaged in during his lifetime.

In 1995, he was scheduled to speak at the Washington National Cathedral to mark the 50th anniversary of our country's use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, at the end of World War II.

Fellow peace activist Rose Marie Berger was to read Thomas Merton's poem "Original Child Bomb." It is a scathing indictment of American militarism.

Daniel Berrigan was to read from Soviet resister Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and from Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who exchanged his life for a fellow prisoner in the Auschwitz death camp in Germany.

But just moments before the service was to begin, a member of the National Cathedral staff told the speakers there had been a change in plans. The Merton poem was too controversial, he told Ms. Berger. She should read from Deuteronomy.

The Soviet and Polish dissidents were too controversial, he told Daniel Berrigan. He should read from Scripture, too.

They were handed a new bulletin with this disclaimer: “Washington National Cathedral has no official view on the history or morality of the first atom bombs or on any foreign or military policy.”

Rose Marie Berger looked at Daniel Berrigan. He smiled and nodded. Then she read from the Merton piece and sat down, trembling, her heart in her throat.

When it was Daniel Berrigan’s turn, he stood and said, “Violence only exists with the help of the lie! Today in America, this church, to our great shame, has perpetuated the lie.”

And he proceeded to give a 20-minute sermon about religious leaders who had lost their way.

After the service, both of these Catholic activists were banned from the cathedral grounds.

The institution that goes by the name of God often turns away the prophet of God.

We can disagree on Daniel Berrigan’s methods – even with his message. But I am astounded at his prophetic courage. His willingness to speak out against ecclesiastical heavyweights who had plenty of recourse to cause him harm.

Twenty four years later, the faith leaders at Washington National Cathedral made a very different decision this summer. Following the president's remarks about an American city, Baltimore, being "a disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess" and "a very dangerous and filthy place," the cathedral's bishop, dean and theologian wrote an open letter of protest.

"When does silence become complicity?" they asked. "What will it take for us all to say, with one voice, that we have had enough? The question is less about the president's sense of decency, but of ours."

They went on to say that we must "boldly stand witness against the bigotry, hatred, intolerance, and xenophobia that is hurled at us, especially when it comes from the highest offices of this nation. ... To stay silent in the face of such rhetoric is for us to tacitly condone the violence of these words."

Every once in awhile, the institution that goes by the name of God steps into its identity.

This is what Isaiah was calling on the people of ancient Judah to do. To reclaim the meaning behind the rituals.

To recognize that the bedrock foundation of their covenant with God was love of God and love of neighbor.

To realize that the expression of justice was the best way to live out that love.

I am proud that many of the people of God in this congregation are working to enact justice and peace and mercy.

Susan Stall is piloting a JustFaith module on racism and white privilege here this week. It was written by our former Furman intern Kristin Dollar, who's taken a job as curriculum writer at JustFaith headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky.

Jean Fontaine and Steve Doughty have traveled to South America as witnesses for Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.

Jim Carroll launched a fundraising initiative for the affordable housing project, Church Street Place at Poe Mill.

Many more of you are involved in important projects of addiction recovery, affordable housing, medical care, literacy, transportation, gun control, prison reform -- all of which have components of equality, of justice, of mercy.

This is the work we must do if we're going to live into the statement on our bulletin: "You are a child of God."

This is the work we must do if we are to worship authentically.

Amen.