

## **The Prophetic Edge** *“Until the cities lie ruined”*

Reflection 42 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Many people today, certainly many young people, see the church as not compassionately addressing the great issues of our times. What they seek is the prophetic edge, those with the courage in our age to contest what is wrong, in the spirit of Martin Luther King, or the spirit of Elijah challenging King Ahab, or Amos discomfiting the complacent crowds of worshipers at the Israelite shrines of Bethel and Gilgal, or Micah insisting that the Lord requires us to act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with our God. So we go back to a text from long before the time of Christ, to the great prophet Isaiah, to a moment in 740 BC (“the year that King Uzziah died”), a moment that changed Isaiah’s life forever and with his life changed ours.

Isaiah would go on from this moment to envision a day when swords would be beat into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (2:1-5), when a child would be born and of the increase of his government and peace there would be no end (9:6-7), when the earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (11:9); a day when death would be swallowed up forever and every tear would be wiped away (25:8), when the dead would live, their bodies would rise and those who dwelt in the dust would wake up and shout for joy (26:19); a day when an anointed one would come to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to comfort all who mourn (61:1-2). But how had this all begun? What had happened in that moment when the prophetic call first came to Isaiah? And how did Isaiah respond? And what really were his odds there at the beginning?

Now as recorded in Isaiah 6:1-13, Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up. That’s it! And this changed everything! Back when people thought differently than we do today and so saw things we do not see today, back before scientific materialism reduced consciousness to a very narrow point of literal-mindedness, Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up. One day, perhaps in the course of Temple duties, God allowed Isaiah to actually see in a very physical way what other worshipers believed to be true in a spiritual way. He saw the Lord seated on a throne, the train of his robe filling the temple. Around him were seraph or seraphim, angels of the highest order, literally “the burning, shining ones,” mentioned only here in Scripture. They were like the four living creatures of Revelation. They had the hands, faces and voices of men. They stood upright. But they had three pairs of wings.

These seraphs called out to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” At the sound of their voices the whole place shook and the temple filled with smoke. Even today the reader, the listener, can almost see it, hear it, feel it, and smell it. What was Isaiah’s response? Terror. Terror is maybe a greatly undervalued human emotion. What maybe we need today is a good dose of old-fashioned terror. Today we cower before this threat or that one, none of them very likely at all, and we remain unmoved by God. Maybe if we could learn again what real fear is, and the One who really alone is to be feared, we would find the courage to face down the things we need not fear.

In any case, Isaiah has seen God and he is terrified. “Woe to me!” he cries (in verse 5), “I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes

have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” Now notice God’s response (in verses 6 and 7): “Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’” God’s response is forgiveness. And it’s quick! Isaiah confesses that God is God and that before God he’s unclean. In other words, he just admits the way things really are. And this is all God asks of us – to admit that God is God and we are unclean – and our guilt is taken away, our sin atoned for.

But the story doesn’t end here. It’s only beginning. Now verse 8: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me.’” [God] said, “Go . . . .” The point, I believe, is this: You can’t see God without doing something about it. You can go to a Yankees game, and the next morning there isn’t much to do about it. You can go to a great Broadway musical or the NCAA Final Four, and the next weekend it matters not at all. You can land the big deal in business, and by day’s end it’s history. You come back from vacation, and things are pretty much the same as when you left. But once you’ve seen God you’ve got to do something about it.

Notice though Isaiah’s mission (in verses 8-10). God says: Go to the people and tell them it’s pretty much over. Don’t soft-soap ’em. Make it clear that they’re down to their last chance. Give it to them strong and then keep on giving it to them. And I suppose I should tell you that it won’t do any good. The movers and shakers of society will ignore you, and most people won’t understand a thing you say. In fact, you’ll probably make them worse!

Of course Isaiah is really motivated now! No. He asks the obvious question: For how long, O Lord?” God’s answer (verses 11-12) is: “Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.” Why? Why then start on such a mission? Verse 13 offers a clue: There is a remnant. A stump. There will be survivors. They are as yet obscure, unorganized, each managing as best he or she can. But when everything has gone, it seems, to ruin, they are the ones who will rise up and build up a new society. Things come and they go. Things come together and they fall apart. And sometimes they must fall apart to make way for what is new and better.

This being true, Isaiah gets on with proclaiming woe. Woe to those who add house to house and field to field till no space is left and they are alone in the land. Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine. Woe to those who call evil good and good evil. Woe to those who acquit the guilty for a bribe but deny justice to the innocent (5:8,11,20,23).

So there are people today, serious people, caring and compassionate people, who are listening carefully for the prophetic edge. There are people today – many of them are Millennials – who seek churches that speak truth to power, that advocate and work for what is just, that contest patterns of prejudice and discrimination, churches that are willing to move out of their comfort zones and address the needs of the poor and the marginalized and the oppressed.

This is, of course, hard, hard work. It's hard work in an age as materialistic as ours, an age that reduces consciousness to a very narrow point of literal-mindedness, to recapture a sense of wonder and awe; to so focus ourselves that we can once again encounter the presence of God and show this way to others; to build community concerned with human flourishing everywhere, community that embodies God's love in practical, meaningful, inclusive, healing ways; to understand and teach Scriptures in their original historical contexts and make allowances for the perspectives of others; to proclaim those deep but sometimes uncomfortable truths of kindness and inclusiveness that we already know in our hearts to be true; to work to enlarge circles of care and compassion everywhere; to stand up boldly to those who have no interest in any of this happening.

This, however, is the challenge of our times, as it was for Isaiah. No matter what the odds are at the beginning. Those churches that do not address the issues of our time will be, and already are being, dismissed as irrelevant. May we stop and look and see. May we see God as God is. May we see life as it is. May we see all the things of our lives as they are. May we think and live and act in ever larger and kinder ways. May we look out not just for our own interests and not just for the interests of those with whom we most identify, but for the interests of all. May we take not just the immediate view but the long view. May we see deeper, higher, wider and farther.

So that one day swords will be beat into plowshares, the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, and death will be swallowed up forever and every tear will be wiped away. The dead will live. Their bodies will rise and those who dwell in the dust will wake up and shout for joy. This is the word of the Lord that came to Isaiah.

– Dale Pauls