

Isaiah

Today's reading from Isaiah is from two different chapters. It's meant to capture the ebb and flow of the whole book.

First today, we'll talk briefly about the particulars of today's reading. But then, we will learn from the ancient prophets, like Isaiah, how we too can become a prophet. Yes, you too could become a prophet.

The 66 chapters that make up the book of Isaiah were likely written by three different people. The first section was written by Isaiah son of Amoz.

Isaiah prophesied to the southern kingdom of Judah. At this point, Israel's fate is set. But it may not be too late for Judah. Isaiah's first words are words of warning.

These two readings together really sum up the words of all the prophets before Israel's downfall and Judah's exile to Babylon.

The first part of the reading outlines the problem. God had high hopes for Israel. God chose them to be God's representatives to the world. They were to show the whole world what it's like to live in a communal relationship with God.

They were to be a community who worshipped the God who created them in God's own image. A God who loved them and tended them, like a landowner would care for his vineyard.

They were to show the world that God's love shaped them to love each other and care for the members of their community who were most vulnerable. And then they were to spread that to the world.

They were blessed so that they could be a blessing to the world.

They failed.

They ended up being just like the nations around them. They worshipped gods who were to be found in things they made with their own hands. Gods whose attributes were often thought to be at best distant and uncaring, and at worst violent, even demanding human sacrifice.

And because behavior follows from what sort of god you worship, Israel's way of life was not what God hoped for.

The rich and powerful just focused on gaining more wealth and power for themselves and the suffering of the vulnerable grew.

Instead of faithfulness and justice, God's vineyard produced violence and exploitation of others, especially those who were least able to fend for themselves.

Instead of the sweet wine of a blessed world, God's vineyard produced the sour wine of wickedness.

And because Israel and Judah became no different than the other nations, they were going to fall victim to the rise and fall of the nations surrounding them.

The second part of today's reading flips that over. God will not give up on them. God will save a remnant. God will establish a new kingdom with a just ruler. He will rule over a people who will finally be able to show the world what it's like when God rules.

OK, so let's use this opportunity to talk about biblical prophecy. I fear that it is often misunderstood. Many think of prophecy as a supernatural ability to predict the future.

People who believe that tend to then comb the Bible trying to match up biblical prophecies – often from the bizarre apocalyptic writing – to events in history. And then they'll look for evidence that's supposed to tell us what will happen in the future.

But the prophets did not in fact have any supernatural power that enabled them to predict the future. Isaiah did not have a supernatural power that enabled him to predict Judah's downfall and the rise of a new realm.

And what's more, you too could be a prophet.

The first step in becoming a prophet is to know God and know God's heart. OK, we'll say up front, we humans can never completely know God. And we may not have the same ability to hear God.

But, God has left plenty of ways for us to at least get start. The first is in creation itself. God spoke and brought a universe into being. God delights in that creation. God created humans in God's image...there is something deep in all of humanity that knows God.

God gave a law that emphasized proper worship and how we treat others. We sum it up with love God, love creation, love other people. The prophets repeatedly tell us that failure to worship the one true God and to love others is what got Israel into trouble.

Perhaps the most difficult thing we would-be prophets of post-enlightenment America need to realize is that God's vision was never primarily about individual salvation. How might that shape our prophetic imagination?

How might it shape us when we realize God's vision was not just about individuals being saved but about a just society – a peaceable kingdom that sought the well-being of not just all people, but all the parts of creation?

And of course, God's most important revelation of God's nature is Jesus. Jesus is our single best way to know God.

Jesus not only taught what this new kingdom would be like, he modeled it. He modeled healing. He modeled forgiveness. He modeled feeding hungry people and hanging out with the people others avoided.

He taught that caring for the hungry, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger, were the same as doing so for Jesus himself.

We can know Christ through our study of scripture and hearing the word proclaimed and sung in worship. We can know Christ through the bread and wine of communion. We connect with God in prayer, both spoken and silent. We can know Christ in the face of another person who is also made in God's image.

And when we know even that much of God, we know exactly what God wants from us. It's the same as God wanted from Israel. God wants to bless the world through our own relationship with God.

The next step in being a prophet is to see where what God wants isn't happening. I'm pretty confident you all can do that.

But I think it's easy for us to get side-tracked and focus on things the Bible really doesn't have much to say about. Things that sometimes even hurt marginalized groups of people.

The prophetic call is to see where people...especially the most vulnerable...are not being cared for. The prophetic call is to see where our worship of money and status and power makes us greedy, selfish, and belittling. And to see how much it harms those who struggle to get from day to day.

Because the Bible tells the story of a people, a nation, our prophetic call includes our own communities and nation. We know because we've read the Bible, especially the prophets, that

a people who do not live God's way – a way of love, blessing, and gratitude – will reap what they have sown.

This is the part where the prophet's vision and ability to listen to God are most important. Prophets don't predict the future with some sort of crystal ball. They read the signs of the times. They see what is going on in their community...their nation. They share God's heart for the world – the divine pathos we talked about last week.

When prophets are steeped in that relationship, when they know what God wants, when they know where it's gone awry, when they can see where things are headed, they speak. That's the hard part.

Once we know all those things, prophets have to say something. That's why most of us are not prophets.

Because this message of God's justice and righteousness is not especially popular – especially among the more wealthy and powerful groups in society. It's not even especially popular for most in the church.

But we get to flip it, too. Like the ancient prophets, there is more for us to say than judgment. God didn't just send a new ruler, God himself came to be our king.

Now what is asked of us prophets is to say, here are the sins of humanity. They will lead to consequences for whole communities, in fact the whole creation...consequences that can lead to death. Judah was defeated and chopped down like a stump in a barren field. But then God's work is resurrection and a new creation. A shoot will come forth....

The prophets could predict that God's judgment on Israel would not be the last word because experience taught them that God is faithful. God would bring them back out of exile and give them a new start.

That pattern of death and resurrection is the other thing we as modern-day prophets can also point to because we have seen it so clearly in Jesus. We too have experienced God's faithfulness...faithfulness to the point of accepting the consequences of the world's evil in his own body.

In Christ's resurrection, that new rule Isaiah and the later prophets talked about was established.

It is a realm that is still unfolding. It's not always visible, and it still needs prophets. But because we know God's faithfulness, we can trust that this rule of righteousness and justice will win in the end.