

“The Message We’re Called to Speak”

February 9, 2025

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-13; Luke 5:1-11

Why do you suppose God would give Isaiah that kind of message to speak to his people? Did you hear it? It’s easy to get swept up in all the excitement and grandeur of God’s appearance in the temple. After that display Isaiah was eager to accept the challenge to be God’s messenger. Then, he’s told what he needs to say: “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.” What? Isaiah’s starting to think he spoke too soon.

So, what is this message all about? What is God trying to say to Israel’s leaders about their place in the world and about their future? Well, scholars have puzzled over this for a long time. We know approximately when Isaiah receives this message. We’re told it’s the year “when King Uzziah died.” Uzziah reigned in Judah for about fifty years, but toward the end of his life he was struck with leprosy, so was confined to his bed. It’s not clear, then, who was really in charge when he died, but his death marks a turning point in Israel’s history. Whenever there’s a loss of a long-standing leader, there’s bound to be a power vacuum and probably some anxiety about the future.

That means Isaiah steps into the temple carrying that anxiety with him. He may wonder what needs to happen now that the king he’s known all his life is gone. Will there be peace for Judah at last or will there be a struggle for succession? He certainly doesn’t anticipate an appearance from God, and when it happens he’s understandably overwhelmed and deeply aware of his own inadequacy. Maybe Isaiah’s shortcomings are a sort of embodiment of the whole nation’s. And just as he can be made acceptable and whole, so can they all. But not before first coming to terms with an inescapable reality.

God seems willing to leave Judah to its own devices. Or as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, “The intention of the decree of Yahweh is that Judah and Jerusalem should be narcotized so that they will not be healed. God wills an unhealed people!” That’s a startling realization. There aren’t really many instances in scripture when God intervenes directly into the affairs of governments. There’s the Exodus, of course, and Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh, but after that God’s activity is usually a matter of hindsight. More often God issues warnings through the prophets, sends invitations for repentance, calls on kings and leaders to behave in ways that bring dignity to the poor or justice to the oppressed, but does not force those leaders and kings to do anything.

When we see nations in our world do horrible things to their own people and their neighbors, it feels like God should somehow intervene. How can these leaders be deaf and blind to the reality of suffering they cause? How can they just ignore the calls for justice, for compassion, for just a hint of empathy for vulnerable people? Yet that is the world in which we live, no different really than Isaiah’s. He spent his career crying at the top of his lungs for the leaders of his society to show compassion to the poor. In the very first chapter we find these

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

Even before his encounter in the temple, Isaiah has been giving the leadership instructions on what to do, how to make things right. They’ve been ignoring him for a long time. There are times in the history of every society when governments become deaf and blind to the poor in the world and refuse to exercise compassion for their most vulnerable. We’re seeing it unfold right in front of us. How many of us know what the United States Agency for International Development, USAID, does in the world? Since Congress created it in 1961, USAID has been a source of hunger relief, education and healthcare for some of the world’s most vulnerable and impoverished people. It has a presence in over 100 countries and responds to disasters and war with humanitarian aid to relieve suffering. It has a budget of 40 billion dollars, which sounds like a lot until you remember we spent 700 billion dollars bailing out banks in 2008, or until you realize 40 billion represents less than 1 per cent of the national budget. In many ways USAID represents the best of what our country has to offer the world. It’s been one way we as a nation, through our government, has been able to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow.”

“Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.” God’s words to Isaiah may not be God causing the leaders of Judah to lack compassion, but just describing their callousness. And Isaiah’s told these leaders will stay that way, until it all collapses around them. If reading the prophets and studying the history of Israel as we find it in the Hebrew scriptures teaches us anything about how the world works, it is failing to care for the poor and the most vulnerable in society is an unsustainable condition. It is how societies fall. The prophets are all in agreement on that point.

And I think Jesus is, too. Leaving Isaiah sort of gob-smacked in the temple for now, let’s turn to Jesus on the sea of Galilee. He has been traveling around the countryside, going from village to village, preaching and teaching and healing, so he has a reputation, but so far not an organized following. This story in Luke is one of several versions of how Jesus called his first disciples. In Mark’s gospel he just calls to them from the shore to follow him and they drop everything and go. But here we have a more detailed encounter. Simon, who would become Peter, accommodates Jesus with his boat by taking him out onto the water so he can teach a little more easily. We don’t really know what Simon thinks of Jesus. He’s probably as curious about him as anyone else. He certainly not looking for a reward for this. So, when Jesus tells him to throw out his net and this massive haul is brought up, where they’ve had no luck all night, Simon is shaken to his core.

He didn’t bargain for anything like this. And he realizes, uniquely I think, he doesn’t deserve this. Simon knows who he is, just like Isaiah knew who he was. Simon understands; he’s not blind or deaf. Jesus is offering something more than just a big haul of fish. He offers Simon and his partners a path that can lead to an abundance they’ve never imagined. And he offers them a chance to toss that net into the world so others can be caught in it and discover that abundance, too.

The way of Jesus is the path of compassion and generosity. It's expressed through a desire to reach out to those in distress and provide comfort and relief. And it's done in a way that recognizes and values each person as they are, rejecting no one out of hand. Yet his call is made without threat or coercion. No one is forced to follow Jesus. Any compulsion they feel is entirely internal. When Peter, James and John see what Jesus is offering them, their past lives fall away and they gladly leave their boats.

The abundance Jesus offers us is no different from the abundance God offered Israel through Isaiah. It's a way of living in the world that isn't burdened with the need to demonize or disparage or disenfranchise others. It's an abundance that courses through us and fills us with a desire for compassion and empathy. It's an abundance that refuses to believe anyone is unworthy of our regard. It's an abundance that recognizes there's more than enough to go around; there's no reason for anyone to be left out; and there's no limit to our capacity to love.

The message we're called to speak, though, is very different from the one Isaiah was given in the temple. In that message we learn that God is willing to risk the complete destruction of Judah, to reduce it to a stump, make it a burned-out ruin, before offering a hint of hope. The message Jesus brings is to be the world's hope. When everything seems to be falling apart around us, when it seems like we have no power to affect change in the world and make our leaders hear and see and comprehend, the message we're given is spoken through acts of compassion and generosity and justice. No matter how callous or casually cruel people in power become, we are called to live with compassion, to reach out with love, to offer hope.

What Isaiah learned in the temple was he could not control whether the leaders of his society would comprehend his message and be healed. He couldn't force them to change their ways. All he could do was continue to speak on behalf of God for the sake of the poor and the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow. The inability of the leadership to comprehend didn't change Isaiah's responsibility. In the same way, those of us who wonder what we can do in the face of leaders who want to dismantle agencies that provide relief to the poor, to herd undocumented immigrants into detention camps, to vilify people for their gender identity, we must not give up our calling to follow Jesus and walk the path of compassion and generosity. No matter how far our society falls, we are still responsible to speak a message of hope. Jesus still calls us out of our boats, to leave our fears behind and help bring healing to the world.

Amen