

July 9, 2017

Lesson 6: Isaiah in the Temple

Scripture: Isaiah 6: 1-8

Context:

Today's lesson jumps to one of the most famous prophets in the Old Testament. Isaiah was a prophet in Jerusalem who probably lived in the latter half of the eighth century (B.C.) and the early part of the seventh century. Isaiah was known for his task of helping to prepare the people of Israel as they faced collapse, captivity, and exile. Through it all Isaiah is a stronghold calling out to God's people to see that God will not give on them even when they have been less than faithful. Through even their calamities, God will bring them back into the fold and uphold God's end of the covenant. The mouthpiece for God will be Isaiah, a prophet strong in words and in vision. The writings in Isaiah tell the story of Israel in a time where the people as a whole are uncertain of what their future may bring.

The book itself is one of the longest in the Old Testament with sixty-six chapters. Most scholars believe that the book itself encompassed several hundred years of Israelite history. It includes time from their royal period, the exile, and then the Diaspora who return to resettle home. The uniting thread is the prophet Isaiah who lives in the present and anticipates where God will lead the people next.

Prophets like Isaiah were always in quandaries in ancient Israel. In the religious caste system, they were the figures at the edges of their authority. Not that they were "lower" or less important in their role, but they were more free agents. Unlike priests and those in the Temple, their claims could be more disputed. Were they truly spokespersons of Yahweh, or were they charlatans looking for five minutes of fame? Those were often the questions regarding prophets in ancient times. Some told great truths and people listened. While others were attacked and had stones thrown at them for pointing out what they saw was wrong in their society. Thus, the term: "No prophet is welcome in their own home town." It can hurt to hear the truth and it can lead even the most religious of people to lose their cool.

Thus, prophets were constantly on the run and had to know that they were truly called by God lest they incur a wrathful reception. Isaiah is one of those who knows his call and can even trace it back to the temple. The reading of his call comes from the sixth chapter in the prophet's book, which is unusual as most call narrative are found early in the chapter. But like any introduction, the book of Isaiah lays out the time he finds himself in as the first chapters describe the calamity and redemption that Israel will face. In chapter five, we hear a metaphorical relationship of Israel as God's vineyard and why God is angry with the people of Israel. Thus, chapter six builds up the introduction of Isaiah.

In his introduction of his own call, Isaiah present himself at the Temple in the midst of mourning King Uzziah. There God sits with winged creatures surrounding the throne. They are in a state of praise. And there unworthy Isaiah sits mourning his predicament of living among an unclean people, yet able to see God of all creation. To give him the authority he needs, one of the creatures takes a burning coal with tongs and touches his mouth. Isaiah is purged of his guilt and sin. When the Lord asks who will go,

Isaiah feels the calls and volunteers to go for God and the winged creatures. Isaiah knows he is called and goes with the knowledge that he is worthy to do what he is called to do.

Application:

I always admire the prophets and their bravado. When I read them, I sometimes have to do a double read of what they say. Especially when I come to the story of Hosea and the words of Amos. Both were prophets with strong words for a chosen people who had so many ups and downs. Even Isaiah has passages that are strongly worded about the sins and transgressions of the Israelite people. But Isaiah continues to prod and remind them that God is not done with them yet. God is in the business of restoring and making people new.

Of all the prophets and call stories in the Bible, I think Isaiah is one of the ones that teaches us that God can use us despite whatever misgivings we may even have about our abilities. For Isaiah, the coal that touched his lips and the pardon he received gave him the knowledge to say: “I will go Lord.” It’s such a searing image: a hot coal touching a person’s lips. All the impurities gone and all the guilt burned away.

But when you think about it, it is the same thing with another element that we experience. With the waters of baptism we are cleansed and redeemed. With them we are claimed by God and have new life in Christ. With that water, we are brought into the family of God and are reminded that God is constantly at work in us whether we are a little newborn or that of a person who is in their eighties or nineties.

Isaiah was claimed by God and was the mouthpiece that God needed to get a hold of Israel and to prepare them for what was going on and what would happen to them in the future. The most beautiful part of his call was that he said “yes” when the Lord needed someone to go forth and do that hard work.

God does the same with us. We think we are unworthy and maybe even have some skeletons in our closet. But our God takes water (or a burning coal with a tong) and transforms us into something new and transformed. The book of Isaiah with its rich metaphors and proclamation from Isaiah reminds us that no matter how far we may run from God, God is still in the midst of situations we face. God may even use us to do the work that needs to be done for the Kingdom of God to continue to flourish and thrive.

Evan Hunter Pugh
Associate Pastor of FUMC Dothan

First United Methodist Church Dothan
1380 West Main Street
Dothan, AL 36301
hunter@fumcdothan.org