

Isaiah 6:1–10 (Tanakh)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple. Seraphs stood in attendance on Him. Each of them had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly.

And one would call to the other,
“Holy, holy, holy!
The LORD of Hosts!
His presence fills all the earth!”

The doorposts would shake at the sound of the one who called, and the House kept filling with smoke. I cried,

“Woe is me; I am lost!
For I am a man of unclean lips
And I live among a people
Of unclean lips;
Yet my own eyes have beheld
The King LORD of Hosts.”

Then one of the seraphs flew over to me with a live coal, which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched it to my lips and declared,

“Now that this has touched your lips,
Your guilt shall depart
And your sin be purged away.”

Then I heard the voice of my Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me.” And He said, “Go, say to that people:

‘Hear, indeed, but do not understand;
See, indeed, but do not grasp.’
Dull that people’s mind,
Stop its ears,
And seal its eyes—
Lest, seeing with its eyes
And hearing with its ears,
It also grasp with its mind,
And repent and save itself.”

Romans 8:12–17 (NRSV)

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Sobering Days

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: May 31, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-10; Romans 8:12-17

“Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me.” This well-known verse from the prophet Isaiah captures the kind of selfless courage we so often admire. Isaiah says, “Put me in, coach. I’ll go.” Isaiah is just the right combination of humility and bravery. “I am a man of unclean lips; I’m not worthy,” he says. But when the call to duty comes, Isaiah is the first to jump into the fray. Like the brave soldier, he leaps into battle. “Here am I; send me,” says Isaiah.

It’s a great scene that the Biblical author creates for us here in chapter six of the book of Isaiah, replete with the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; the skirts of His robe filling the Temple. Six-winged seraphs singing, holy, holy, holy. The very walls shudder and the Temple fills with smoke. Everything is larger than life. And then the Lord asks, “Who will go for us?” And Isaiah rises to the challenge. “Here I am; send me.”

Preachers often use this passage to inspire the people. Be like Isaiah. Respond to God’s call. Like Isaiah you can just say, yes. And the people who give us the lectionary seem to have this in mind, too. The prescribed reading for the day ends at verse eight with the words, “Send me!” It’s rousing, inspiring stuff. It’s a great place to conclude the reading.

It’s a great place to conclude the reading because almost immediately things take a disturbing turn. Immediately after he volunteers, Isaiah is given instruction as to what he is to actually do. The Lord says to tell the people, “Hear, indeed, but do not understand; See, indeed, but do not grasp.”

And it gets worse, Isaiah is instructed to actually make the people unable to hear or understand lest they actually repent and save themselves. Isaiah is to keep the people from understanding. The Lord insists, as the passage goes on, that the people must fail to repent and be punished. The cities will be devastated and fall. Nine of every ten inhabitants will be slaughtered and the remaining tenth carried away.

No wonder the reading often ends where it does, before the Lord’s gruesome and vengeful plan is laid out.

So disturbing were these verses that even the old Rabbis said surely the command to keep the people from understanding should be understood as predictions that they wouldn’t understand. Surely neither the Lord nor Isaiah would purposely keep the people from repenting so the population could be punished, reasoned the Rabbis. Surely the text meant that no matter how hard Isaiah and the Lord tried, the people’s ears would be stopped, their eyes covered and their minds dulled. The ancient Rabbis couldn’t abide the idea that the Lord would purposely deceive the people so he could punish them.

Events of our time put an even finer and more devastating point on the concern. For even if, as the Rabbis say, the Lord didn’t make the people fail to repent, it’s clear that because the people would not repent, they would be punished. And this idea of a God who punishes people for their sins has more than a few problems. The idea that people get what they deserve isn’t very convincing. Is the the young human rights worker whom Isis beheads punished because she

failed to hear God's word? Are unarmed black men shot to death because God is punishing them? Was the Holocaust what Isaiah was referring to when it says that ninety percent of the people will be slaughtered? After all the Hebrew word for the desolation Isaiah predicts is a form of the word Shoah, the word many Jews use to describe the Holocaust. Isaiah is even instructed to tell the people that they will be burned to death. Marvin Sweeney, a Jewish Biblical scholar who has written extensively about reading the Bible in light of the Holocaust and interpreting suffering as punishment says euphemistically, "The prophet's commission ... is very disturbing."¹ I should say so.

Sweeney and the ancient rabbis want to challenge the text. They want to grapple with the problems it raises. Like Jacob, they want to wrestle with God. Too often, I think, we see the Bible as a fixed set of ideas, the Word of God writ large, immutable, precise, and clear. But the stories and ideas in the Bible are always a conversation between God and God's people, and like all conversations it's hardly static. Like all conversations, it has detours and missed opportunities and misperceptions. Like all conversations, at least the productive ones, there are developments, and new ideas arise. It's fair to say that the New Testament and the development of Christianity is a continuation of this conversation between God and God's people. In this ongoing conversation from Genesis to Revelation common themes and questions appear and reappear, are worked and reworked. And one of the most prominent of them is this question of why things happen the way they do, especially why some people do well and others suffer.

This morning we read from the prophet Isaiah and from Paul's letter to the Romans. Two texts separated by almost a millennium, and yet each in its own way tussles with the impact of how we live our lives.

Paul doesn't try to directly answer the question of why good and bad things happen. But Paul is clear that our attachment to worldly things leads to bad results. For Paul greed and lust, grasping after success and pleasure are evidence of our separation from God. And for Paul, separation from God, no matter how appealing it may look on the surface, inevitably is destructive to human well-being. For Paul, living connected to God is like being in a well-functioning family. We are children of God. We cry out to God who is a loving parent. We are brothers and sisters of Christ. We are heirs to God's love.

Paul is talking about something beyond the obvious here. He understands that a person who is in a loving relationship with God may well still suffer. Indeed, one of the most important contributions that Christianity has made in the ongoing conversation between God and God's people is to say that suffering is not necessarily punishment. When Christ died on the cross, it was clear that the winners that day, the Romans and a portion of the religious officials, were the ones who were separated from God. The one who suffered was God's own child, as are we when we suffer.

What Paul recognizes is that sometimes there is greater suffering in being separated from God, from being hateful and selfish, than there is from being victimized by hate and selfishness. Or put another way, sometimes there is greater unhappiness in having the things in life that one thinks will make one happy—money, prestige and so on—than there is in being impoverished of these things. This is not an excuse to make people impoverished for their own good, but it is to say that once you get beyond meeting your reasonable needs, more wealth and power can often be destructive of our well-being.

¹ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 279.

And this is where Paul and Isaiah overlap. Whether it is religious idolatry, gaining wealth at the expense of one's neighbors, or lust after one's neighbor's wife, as with King David, these things that seem so tempting are traps ready to spring. Yet as Isaiah is told to say, the people will cover their eyes and ears and refuse to hear and see. As Paul well knew, in every church he established, in every church where people answered the call of the Gospel, Paul would soon be writing to them about the horrible ways they were treating each other or falling prey to the wiles of the world.

I have given this sermon the title, "Sobering Days." By that I meant that the days in which Isaiah and Paul lived were sobering, because the people were so tenaciously controlled by self-destructive forces. And, of course, I meant that we in our time have not escaped this human condition. Just as before, we deceive ourselves. We make up excuses. We tell ourselves lies. And we revile those who would expose the truth. We chase after flimsy pleasures in preference to that which will truly satisfy us.

Like Isaiah's days, these are sobering days, for there is little evidence that tomorrow the world will suddenly change its ways. The old Rabbis were right. Isaiah didn't have to block the people's eyes and ears. They would do a fine enough job of that themselves.

But even so, even so, God sent Isaiah, and Isaiah went. "Here am I; send me." There is something profoundly faithful about a God who sends a prophet knowing the message will fall on deaf ears. There is something profoundly freeing about answering yes to God without being responsible for the success of where it takes you. There is something profoundly bold about venturing forth when, as Eliot's magi put it, there are "voices singing in our ears saying, that this [is] all folly.

Yet Paul is surely right when he tells us that the foolishness and the weakness of God are stronger and wiser than the strength and wisdom of human schemes. Maybe, just maybe, that will give us courage enough when we hear, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" that we may say "Here am I; send me." Amen.