

“Of Prophets & Kings, Pre-Exile 1: Speaking Truth to Power”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden for FUMC
Grand Junction, Pentecost Sunday, June 19, 2022

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/worship-services>

Scripture Texts:

Isaiah 6:1-8 [NLT]

OPENING

(*Why this series? A playful start: I want to conduct a brief, informal poll...*)

- ✓ As I have studied more of the Bible in recent years – including the NT, the authors of which quote frequently from the Prophets – but especially the Hebrew Bible, I have come to see that a reading of the Prophets cannot be done faithfully if disconnected from the society to which they spoke – and especially from the Kings who reigned in the times of those Prophets...which...opens up a whole other area of complexity in our study of the Prophets and Biblical prophecy.

If there's one sure-fire way to *mis*interpret the Biblical Prophets and make all kinds of anachronistic, even nonsensical, inferences from their writings, it's to lift their words from their contexts and insist that they are, first and foremost, *predictions* of events in later times – especially our own times. I refer to this as “popular” Biblical prophecy.

We can certainly draw *parallels* to our own times from some of the writings of the Prophets, and we fail to do so to our detriment, if not our peril. But those parallels must start at a point anchored in the Prophets' own historical settings. When we start there, we find that, indeed, the Prophets have much to say to us.

But this is more than a study; it is worship. And my aim is

- to teach and to inspire,
- to bring fresh insights and fresh appreciation of who God is and what God values,
- to show that God in the Old Testament is not simply a God of wrath and punishment but a God of passion who desires the very best for His people.

And Biblically speaking, God's passion finds ready expression in the words of the Prophets – addressed to kings *and society* with both *wrath and tenderness*. I hope it'll be a transformative journey!

SERMON THOUGHTS

So, let's dive in...

There is SO much material to work with here and so many ways to approach it. In “our” Bibles, there are what are called 4 “major prophets” – Isaiah, Jeremiah/Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel – and 12 “minor prophets”. (*The distinction made only by the length of the works that bear their names.*)

Then there is 1st & 2nd Samuel, 1st & 2nd Kings, and 1st & 2nd Chronicles that add to the complexity.

By the time you get through a consideration of those 23 Biblical books, you've accounted for almost 60% of the entire Old Testament!

That alone seems to make a pretty strong case for being familiar with this material OR it explains why so many of us just throw up our hands in despair and confusion and leave the subject to "the experts"...whoever they are. But, as I said, that was no longer a viable option for me, especially as the one who is appointed here by the Bishop to be a reliable Biblical guide for the congregation. And I take that trust – invested in me by her Office and by you, the congregation – very seriously.

Happily, there is a way to approach this material in a sensible, organized way. Given my commitment to exploring the Prophets in their contexts, it makes sense to me to organize this into four easily remembered blocks:

1. Pre-exile: The Monarchy (United and Divided) up to the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel
2. The Judean Period
3. The Exile
4. Post-exile and the rebuilding of the nation in the Persian period, begun by King Cyrus who defeated the Babylonians and allowed any of the Jewish exiles who desired to do so to return to Jerusalem and rebuild her walls and Temple.

And I'll be working on 2 sermons for each of these 4 blocks. So, that'll be 8 weeks of the 12-week summer.

The other 4 weeks, we'll take a break from this and have lighter, music-centered worship.

The last thing I want to say in terms of "setup" here is that there is no way we're going to be able to explore every aspect of the Biblical Prophets and their writings and the kings and society to whom they wrote. All we're going to be able to do is touch on some of the highlights and consider how they speak to us in our time. (*As they said to us in seminary, you've got the rest of your lives to explore this in detail. Right!*)

TO THE SCRIPTURES

So, let's look at the first block:

1. Pre-exile (*Define this*)
2. Prophets: Samuel and Nathan
 - ✓ Kings: Saul and David (Samuel & Nathan)
David and Solomon (Nathan)
3. Prophets: Elijah and Elisha
 - ✓ King: Ahab, of the N. Kingdom of Israel
4. Prophets: Isaiah. (*Which one?! There were 3 writers of "the book" of Isaiah!*)
 - ✓ "1st Isaiah" spoke into the lives of 4 of the major kings of the S. Kingdom of Judah prior to the exile, the first of whom was the king mentioned in the first verse of the Scripture reading for today: King Uzziah. King Uzziah started out very good, then like so many of the others, became corrupted by idol worship and self-serving policies, not policies that served his people.

MORE SERMON THOUGHTS

In this sermon, I want to highlight three aspects of Biblical prophecy, 2 from the life and oracles of 1st Isaiah, and one more general observation:

1. The difference between prophecy as *foretelling* and prophecy as *forthtelling*, an idea I bring to us from Michael Card, a brilliant writer of music that, like our stained glass windows, tells the stories of the faith in vivid, memorable song.

As I mentioned earlier, we tend to equate prophecy with *foretelling* and have no sense of prophecy as *forthtelling*. And that's because, for the most part, the "experts" to whom we relegate the explanation of Biblical prophecy all focus on *foretelling* as a means of (1) validating their view of the sovereignty of Scripture or (2) attempting to control culture and society through fear and threat.

To be fair, there are elements of *foretelling* in Biblical prophecy, but by far the more dominant dynamic in Biblical prophecy is *forthtelling*.

2. Isaiah's call to witness powerfully to the rulers of his day and to society; this is primarily *forthtelling*. Another way to think about this is that it is Isaiah's call "to speak truth to power". "Speaking truth to power" is a hallmark of Biblical prophecy, and it makes a lot of people nervous. We'd rather have the Biblical prophets engage in "crystal balling" and *foretelling*; we don't like it when they get in our face. And that's basically what "speaking truth to power is."

Remember the story of Nathan and King David? It's told in the first 15 verses of 2 Samuel 12 – go look it up, and you will see Nathan "speaking truth to power" in very risky, daring, but faithful ways.

3. The last thing that I have observed in my study of Biblical prophecy that will form a consistent theme in the sermons of this series is that it is just as concerned with social justice as it is piety. That is, whereas we prefer to focus on the first of the two great commandments – "You shall love the LORD your God..." – to the neglect of the second – "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" – the Biblical prophets see those two as being inseparable: You cannot have one without the other. And social justice gets reflected in the 2nd commandment.

The social justice issue of our time, and one that is deeply divisive as most are, is that of racism in all its ugly manifestations, the most horrific of which was the enslavement of Africans in our country and in other parts of the world in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. I think we would all agree that there is no Christian justification for this by any measure. And yet, for centuries, slavery was justified by the power-wielding Christians of the day, Christians of European decent in other words, "white" Christians.

JUNETEENTH. Today, with the celebration of Juneteenth, we have the opportunity to be addressed by the dynamics of Biblical prophecy. (*Unpack this a bit with relation to Juneteenth.*)

Juneteenth is not about blame or guilt or judgement of persons, any more than Easter is about the

condemnation of non-Christian religions. Easter is about a proclamation of the triumph of good over evil, of love over hate, of the forces of life over death.

Similarly, I see the celebration of Juneteenth as being a proclamation:

- A proclamation that the exploitation and enslavement of any group of human beings for any reason is wrong and will not be tolerated, justified, or cultivated in this country.
- It's a proclamation of hope that supports one of the key themes in our Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all are created equal..."
- And it's a proclamation that invites us to aspire to and embody the higher ideals of the nation of which we are all a part

CONCLUSION

The questions that come to mind that I want to leave you with to wrestle with in the week ahead are these:

1. How have you responded when a modern-day "Isaiah" shared with or around you a prophetic witness, a *forthtelling*, a "speaking-truth-to-power" that you knew was spot-on, but which "got in your face"?
2. Has God ever called you to such a role: bearing a prophetic witness, a *forthtelling*, a speaking-truth-to-power? How have you responded? Like Isaiah: "Here I am, send me!"? Or more like Jonah: "You got the wrong person, God!"
3. How do you identify with and respond to the social justice issues of our time?

These are not just rhetorical questions; they are at the center of nearly 60% of the Old Testament! These themes reveal the heart of God and how God would have us behave as faithful followers of His. And certainly as faithful disciples of Jesus...

Just so you don't think I'm judging you in all of this, it is also said the preacher preaches the sermon he or she most needs to hear. I'm taking this stuff to heart, too.

Let's join together in a beloved hymn of our faith that has enshrined Isaiah's response to God's question, "Who will go and do our bidding where prophetic witness needs to be proclaimed?"

♪ "Here I Am, Lord"