

The Post-Modern Prophet

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Sermon

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Preached at Chapel of Unnamed Faithful, November 11, 2004

As we stand at the eve of a new age, an epoch some describe as the postmodern age, we as ministers of the gospel are confronted with unforeseen challenges—the challenges of globalization, the forging of an information based economy, declining significance of nation-states and the rise in dominance of large multinational corporations. As wars rage on Iraq, genocide in the Sudan and Sierra Leon, worker exploitation in Central America, and rampant poverty and incarceration in America, the question looms over our heads: where are the prophets?; where is the prophetic voice of the church? Where is the urgent cry of justice; the visceral trumpet of truth speaking to power?

Some would say that the role of economics and the postmodern declaration of truth hidden behind the veil of personal autonomy is to blame. Drunk with the latest gossip poll, 24 hour infotainment and the ever occurring reality TV show, the idea of speaking truth to power; proclaiming God's presence in the world has become mundane and meaningless to many. Hence, some have turned the way of an emotional and materialistic Christianity consumed by capitalistic culture and uncritical of social or political realities.

But in these ancient words of the Third Isaiah, we discovered a prophet who, amid an Exilic people, proclaimed God's way in the world—the way of righteousness, peace, truth and justice. The prophet was speaking to refugees recently returning from Babylonian captivity, those who were depressed and discouraged about the difficulty of

life in the ruins of Jerusalem. There was a sense of urgency and even desperation in his voice as he said:

"The Spirit of YHWH Elohim is upon me, because YHWH has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; he has sent me to shore up the broken spirited, to proclaim freedom to the captives, the opening of prison to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of YHWH's favor, and the day of our God's vengeance." (61:1-2)

As with Isaiah of Jerusalem and Second Isaiah, this prophet expressed his awareness of prophetic calling. Third Isaiah was drawn to minister to God's people, even to fire them up. He had a formidable job to do. Jerusalem was in ruins. The community, too, was morally fragmented. There was dissension between the Judeans who had never left, the so-called people of the land, and those who had returned from exile.

Third Isaiah encouraged those struggling for faith in the absence of a temple and sacrifices. He assured them that God was present even if no building housed him. He says again in later passages:

"Just as the new heavens and the new earth which I am about to make shall stand before me, so shall your offspring and your name stand. From new moon to new moon, from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship me," says YHWH. (66:22-23)

Through difficult times and dreadful conditions, Third Isaiah sought to keep the faith of the people alive. He was speaking to a strange people in a strange land. The ancient Hebrews, in an Exilic world, would find much in common with our experience today. They were confronted with the might of the Assyrian Empire, the lone superpower of the

ancient world. The full impact of the forces of ancient globalization came upon them and the prophet was challenged to proclaim God's new reality, new creation in the world.

Certainly, as we live in a postmodern age, described by Gianni Vattimo as the "end of history," the church is faced with the brisk realities of a globalized world. As Michael Budde reminds us, we live in a world where the VCR has triumphed and the lure of capitalism has slithered its way among all peoples and cultures of the world. This has resulted in a breakdown in community and hostility toward others who do not share our beliefs or values. Even in the Christian community, there has developed a fragmentation and breakdown of theological legitimacy. It's interesting that 70% of those who attend church support the Bush administration in the recent election. What it demonstrates is the vast disagreement even among Christians about our nature and mission in the world.

In it all, the third prophet of Isaiah gives a vision of a new creation; though ancient this prophet shares in our predicament as postmodern Christians; he shares with us powerful insights from the archaic past about the task before us today.

As we take lessons from Isaiah, what is the task before the prophet of a postmodern age?

The postmodern prophet proclaims God's new reality in the world by first proclaiming justice for all people.

The idea of justice is lost, allusive at best. Justice seems to be whatever the individual or even the state apparatus says it is. But Isaiah rejects all notions of justice not rooted in the liberating activity of God toward the oppressed. For Isaiah, justice is unintelligible outside of the God who liberates the oppressed and comes to the aid of the downtrodden, the least of these, the marginalized of the world.

Justice, for Isaiah and certainly for us as well, must be rooted in a community of faith where God reigns and is recognized as sovereign in the world. Justice is never understood in isolation, as Kant would have us to believe. This presents a scathing indictment upon the U.S. policy toward the UN with its doctrine of preemption; the radical withdrawal of the Kyoto Treaty and a rejection of nuclear dismantling treaties. Community protects against loose snakes (as Nietzsche articulated). For Nietzsche, humans are bound together tightly like a den of snakes and every now and then one shakes loose and reigns havoc on the world—like the Hitlers, Mussolinis, Stalins, and Napoleons.

No wonder Dan Bell, the postmodern liberationist, calls for a “redeemed justice” based on trust and forgiveness rooted in the biblical tradition. This is the kind of justice Micah called for when he wrote, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream!”

The postmodern prophet also ushers in a community that celebrates difference and the uniqueness of otherness.

After the exile, identity was interwoven into their cultural and religious heritage. In post-Exile, Israel would never be the same again. We find the same reality today as we live in a world that brings us increasingly closer to other ways of life, other cultures, and other beliefs. With the declining significance of nation-states, the rise of technology, cell phones and the Internet, and email, we experience new identities even as we sit in our living rooms grasping our remotes. People all over the globe are being shaped and

formed by each other through technological means only possible in a post-industrialized world.

Hence, we are left with a desperate appreciation for the otherness of the other. That we find God in the differences we embody, not in our uniformity. Desmond Tutu captures this when he said, “a self-sufficient human is a subhuman...we become human only through others.” There is another African proverb which says, “I am because we are.”

T.H. Green accessed this correct when he argued that human beings do not know what it means to be human outside of our social relationships. And my favorite poet Maya Angelou had it right when she said, “Nobody but nobody can make it our here alone.” John Donne uncovered this truth when he said, “No man is an island of himself, every man is part of continent, a piece of the main.”

The prophet Isaiah proclaims the new creation and reality of God in the world—he was ushering a new community guided by the power of justice conditioned by the reign of God.

The postmodern prophet ultimately makes way for the presence of God in the world—the way of peace, of justice, of humility, of liberation and reconciliation.

But this way coming into being does not come without a price. As Walter Bruggerman reminds us, the way of the world always militates against the way of God coming into being.

This challenges us, as postmodern prophets, to confront the economic and political systems of oppression, even the misguided theologies and ideologies rampant in our world and certainly in our churches. Making the way for the presence of God calls for a

radical witness through faithful living, solidarity with those who suffer, and standing for peace and justice.

It calls for the type of witness expressed in the words of the prophet Micah when he said, “what does the Lord require but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before our God.”

It might be summed up in that old spiritual, “A charge to keep I have and a God to glorify, who gave His life my soul to save and fit it for the sky; to serve this present age, my calling to fulfill; may it all my powers engage to do the master’s will!”