

Flaming Lips

Nobody wants to be a prophet. At least they shouldn't, if they've read the job description. Unlike Ezekiel that we talked about last week, when Isaiah gets his call, things are going pretty well in Israel. King Uzziah, as is recorded in 2 Chronicles 26, was a good king, who did what was right in the sight of the Lord. Uzziah took the throne of Judah when his father Amaziah (also a good king) died. Uzziah was only 16 at the time, but as he grew into manhood, he became strong and successful, doing the right things and increasing the fortunes of Judah. He reigned for 52 years, which is no small feat given the hazardous and stressful times. He passed his throne to his son Jotham, who also "did what was right in the sight of the Lord." It wasn't until the time of Ahaz, Uzziah's grandson that Judah really had any bad times.

The only sign that we have that perhaps a prophet was needed was this one little incident toward the end of Uzziah's reign; full of himself he demanded to go into the Temple of the Lord and offer incense, and that was not his place, that was the job of the descendants of Aaron. The Priests stood up to the king and the king fought them, and he was struck with a leprous sore on his forehead, which marked him as unclean and therefore unworthy by any standard to usurp the authority of the priesthood. He was defeated, not by violent resistance of the priests, but by God himself, and because of the leprosy, he had to spend the rest of his days separated from his house, ruling in name only, while Jotham essentially got some on the job training.

This one incident does not invalidate Uzziah's place in the ranks of those who did what was right in the sight of the Lord, but it does show you that things were a bit shall we say wobbly even in Judah, which was always safer and more secure than the northern Kingdom of Israel. The problem with safety, security and success is that they breed pride, which leads to a special kind of idolatry, with which we in present day America are particularly familiar with: the idolatry of the self. Uzziah's fault was that he thought he was more important than anything else. His life experience and the general state of affairs in Judah led him to believe that he could break with cultural norms and challenge the other main authority in the kingdom: the priesthood of Aaron.

Despite this one rather dramatic warning sign, the year that King Uzziah died was not a year of doom and gloom, it was a transition from one well-loved king to another. The rumblings of the apostasy of the people were far off, and yet Isaiah is given the call to proclaim destruction to Judah and warn them of exile. Now let me tell you, if it's hard to be a prophet when things are falling apart like Jeremiah, or when things have fallen apart like Ezekiel, it is the hardest thing in the world to be a prophet when things are going well. Nobody wants to hear what you have to say, even if the signs are there, like a leprous sore on Uzziah's forehead, that things aren't as good as they seem.

Isaiah, like other prophets in this position (Amos for instance), distances himself from what he is saying by emphasizing that it is the very Holy Spirit of God that is speaking through him. The whole vision with the Seraph and the flaming coal is just that, a justification for him speaking, his lips have been purified by fire, and he is answering a call from God. He is about to tell a people who are doing pretty well by most standards, that they are about to be completely cut off and burnt, that not even a tenth part (the biblically important remnant) will remain, only a burnt stump.

Lo and behold, during the reign of Ahaz son of Jotham, things were getting a little Game of Thrones-like. Ephraim, a tribe of Israel had allied with Aram (not of Israel), against Jerusalem, but they couldn't pull it off. But Ahaz was upset, and Isaiah tells him, don't worry about these two small fish, Assyria is coming,

in fact Assyria is behind these two knuckleheads you're so worried about. Eventually the Assyrian threat becomes real and takes down the Northern Kingdom, but not Judah, leading to the deep and long lasting enmity between Judah and Samaria. Isaiah functions as a prophet through all of that, continually speaking the truth to successive kings, sometimes they listen, most times they don't, but Isaiah is there always telling them that the Lord has a different set of standards than the kings would make for themselves.

Through one of the most tumultuous times in Israel's entire history, Isaiah is the voice of God to the people, from the lowest to the king. He doesn't always tell them what they want to hear, in fact, most of the time he does not. He is honest about threats that will come and sometimes is even a voice of hope that all is not lost, but like one of those small fish gets eaten by big fish scenarios, eventually, a big enough fish comes along.

That's always the way it is with earthly kingdoms, even ones that are chosen and blessed by God, there is always a bigger fish. There is always a rot that starts from within when even the "good" kings get a little too full of themselves, when everyone assumes that good times mean that God is pleased with them. Prophets show up when that starts to happen, they have been showing up in this country for half a century, since the early 20th century theologians in our Christian church have been warning us about the perils of empire. We don't like to listen, because after all, things aren't that bad, in fact we seem to be enjoying success and prosperity, so what's a little leprous sore on the forehead?

This is what worries me, when the king comes into the temple to offer incense, the priests aren't even resisting, they're a little too eager to welcome him on in and let him use their holy things for his own purposes. Our lips need some burning coals to purify them perhaps, we have lost sight of Jesus who inherently mistrusted the authorities like Nicodemus, who came at night. He recognizes the debauched form of religion that has embraced legalism and condemnation of God's people and used that to maintain corrupt systems and even collude with a hostile conquering empire, and he says to Nicodemus, "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand this?"

Jesus was not simply a prophet, but it was his prophetic activity that got him in the most trouble. Particularly his prophetic activity that rocked the boat and threatened those who were getting along just fine under Caesar and Herod. In Isaiah's time, the priesthood had not yet sold out to the King, in Jesus time they absolutely had. I have some prophetic questions that I would like to ask some of our most visible religious leaders these days, but I do not think they will listen, or answer.

The message of love is prophetic in our day and age. The reality of a God who loves and does not condemn, who judges with perfect light instead of legalistic anger will shake our temples to their foundations. A God whose wrath is inspired by injustice and failures of love rather than by simple weakness and wandering, will show us that we have been prideful, arrogant and idolatrous in calling upon Jesus' name while also pledging our allegiance to an earthly king and kneeling at the altar of our own selves. Our lips should be flaming with the pure and prophetic word that God so loved the world... you know the rest.