

HOT LIPS, COLD HEARTS

(Preached at Shabbat Services, Temple Bat Yam as part of the Pulpit Exchange Weekend)

This past Thursday I walked down the stairs from my office to the portico out in front of the church where Sally Sacks and Sandy Teger from your congregation, and Ed Wheeler from mine, were unloading groceries from the cars driven through by members of our two congregations. Groceries which are being given to two local food pantries. We've been doing it together ever since the pandemic started. Every month. The effort grows out of our shared commitment as Christians and Jews to feeding the hungry, one of the many ways we respond to the teachings we find in our sacred texts. After all, we are people of the book--and in both our traditions we rely on sacred writings to provide us guidance as we seek to be people not just of the book, but people of God. So, we go to the text with great frequency.

Much like the Jewish cycle of readings from Torah, we Christians also have a cycle of readings from the Bible, though our cycle is three years long rather than one. Called the lectionary, the cycle has four readings assigned to every Sunday, one from various books found in the Hebrew scriptures, always one of the Psalms, and two readings from the New Testament, one from the Gospels and one from the Epistles, the letters of St. Paul and others.

Passages from the book of Isaiah make frequent appearances in the Christian lectionary, including the reading from tonight's haftorah from chapter six. If I'm really honest about it though I must admit Protestant Christians like me, have been wimps about the whole thing. For the assigned lectionary reading always ends with verse 8. Isaiah has this incredible vision, senses God's call to bring a prophetic word to the people, and enthusiastically responds with the words, "Here am I, send me!" As one commentator notes, "That may be the climax, but it is not the end. The church tradition that selected the lectionary lost its nerve when it came to the prophet's commission, [regarding] what he was told to say and do." (Gene M. Tucker, *New Interpreter's Bible*, VIU: 105)

So, what is it that Isaiah is called to say? What do we Protestants leave out? What message is he supposed to deliver? It ain't pretty, that's for sure! "Go and say to my people," God tells Isaiah, "'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mid of the people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not . . . comprehend with their minds and turn and be healed." (6:9-10)

Say what? You want me to be a prophet and do what? I thought prophets were supposed to warn people of impending doom so that they might repent and change their ways in order to ward off calamities of, well, Biblical proportions. You know stuff like, how did you put it, cities being laid to waste, fields being ravaged, houses deserted, people being sent away! Instead of giving them one last chance, you want me to make sure they don't hear the warnings?

No wonder Isaiah may have been a bit confused. No wonder we are confused! We generally assume as Rabbi Heschel wrote, "the mission of a prophet is to open the people's hearts, and to enhance their understanding and to bring about their . . . turning to God." (*The Prophets*, 1:90) But that's not what Isaiah is being called to do! In fact, it seems as if what he is being told to do "defeat[s] the essential purpose of being a prophet." (*Ibid*, 89)

So really, is it any real surprise that we Christians cut it off at verse eight? So much easier for preachers to talk about being called by God, even if we do have to explain that seraphs aren't exactly Hallmark angels. Even if we do shudder at the idea of hot coals being placed on Isaiah's lips! We're good with the hot lips part of the passage, but the cold hearts section, that's a bit more of a challenge. But there it is, plain and simple. Isaiah has a vision, an encounter in the temple with the Lord, one filled with smoke and fire and seraphs singing God's praises. And then he's issued a call, in a rather dramatic way. A call to go out and make the minds of the people dull! Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, "Make these people blockheads with fingers in their ears and blindfolds on their eyes." (*The Message*, 1216)

Now granted, sermons can have a dulling effect, but that's not what's usually intended by the preacher!

Lyndon Johnson used to tell a story about a preacher who seemed to have just that effect on one parishioner in particular. The man would come to church every Sunday, and as soon as the sermon started, he'd fall fast asleep. So, one Sunday the preacher decides to see if he could rouse the man from his slumbers. First, in a very quiet voice, he practically whispers, "Everyone who wants to go to heaven, please stand up!" Immediately, every congregant rises to his or her feet. After they had all sat back down, the preacher then shouted, "Now, if you want to go to hell, stand up!"

Startled awake by the sudden shout, the once sleeping parishioner immediately stood up. Then, as he tried to figure out what was happening, he said, "Preacher I don't know what we're voting about, but looks like you and me are the only ones in favor of it!" (Lowell Streiker, *An Encyclopedia of Humor*, 35)

No, preachers nor prophets usually want to lull folks to sleep. Nor, truth be told, do we usually want to issue dire warnings about the future. No, preachers and prophets alike hope to motivate, inspire, move folks to action, not lull them to sleep!

But sometimes we do one or the other--and Isaiah seems to have been called to do both!

So, what are we to make of this chapter in Isaiah? Contextually, everything Isaiah predicted did come to pass. The land was laid to waste, cities were ruined, fields were ravaged. And despite the warnings Isaiah issued, the people did fail to take heed. But what does that mean for us today? How should we who revere this ancient book, who treasure its words, who think enough of them to read them again and again, how should we respond? Do we see this as simply a history lesson? A retelling of things in the past? Do we see it as a theological commentary on the power of God? Does it address the age-old question of theodicy and provide an answer as to why there is evil in the world? Does it tell us God permits it--even causes it?

I suppose we could treat it in any of these ways. But I would suggest there is another way we can understand it's import. Yes, Isaiah was instructed to make the minds of an ancient people dull and the hearts of people who lived hundreds of years ago cold, but that doesn't mean our minds need be dulled, that doesn't mean our hearts need to be hardened. In fact, if we are willing to recognize that this passage is not an example of what we should do, but rather, an example of what we should not do, then we are on the right path.

Heschel is helpful yet again. "The haunting words which reached Isaiah," he writes, "seem not only to declare the intention to inflict insensitivity, but also to declare that the people are already afflicted by a lack of sensitivity." (Ibid, 90) In other words, a lack of sensitivity, ultimately leads to insensitivity. The inability to feel the pain of others. It is reminiscent of the old urban myth about boiling frogs. Put a frog in a pot of boiling water, so goes the myth, and he'll immediately jump out. Put him in cold water and gradually warm it up, he will settle in for a nice cool bath and stay put, but eventually die as the water comes to a boil. If we don't regularly pay attention to the prophets in our midst, and listen to the warnings they offer, a time will come when we can no longer hear them. Our ears will be stopped. Our eyes closed shut. And at that point we will be beyond the power of mere words to wake us up to reality!

I've spent a fair amount of time this week trying to get a vaccine appointment for my eighty-eight-year-old mother, as well as my wife and myself. Many of you, I am sure, have also known the frustrations of such efforts. But that should come as no surprise, after all our response to the pandemic has been in a state of disarray right from the start. Why? Because of insensitivity to the warnings. Thirty years ago, Nobel laureate Joshua Lederberg wrote:

“Some may say that AIDS has made us ever vigilant for new viruses, I wish that were true. Others have said that we could do little better than to sit back and wait for the avalanche.” (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/experts-warned-pandemic-decades-ago-why-not-ready-for-coronavirus/>) Modern Isaiahs have been telling us a global pandemic not only could happen, but most likely would. But our leaders were not paying attention. We were not prepared. And only now are we really waking up to that reality. After the avalanche. After the nation has, in some respects, been laid to waste.

For many more decades there have been those who have warned that racism is real, and despite advances in civil rights, still a present danger. But many have ignored such truths and have become blind to the reality. Only something like the murder of George Floyd before our very eyes, or the attack on the Capitol, has opened our eyes, caused us to see afresh that which has always been there.

And don't get me started about climate change.

All too often we have turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the prophets. The modern day Isaiahs. All too often we have failed to heed their words and then are caught seemingly off-guard when riots and wildfires and pandemics have shown up at the door.

But it need not be that way. For in both of our traditions we have these examples that we call scripture, these stories, and texts, to point us in the right direction. It is why we read them on a regular basis, a recurring basis. It is why scrolls are unrolled and books opened up. It is why we study them. Not just as an academic exercise. Not just to practice a more perfect piety. But so that we might take their truths and apply them to our lives here and now.

Amen

John H. Danner