

Give God Some Elbow Room
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Isaiah 6:1-13 (NRSV)

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: "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 eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Introduction and Comments:

Little Harold was practicing the violin in the living room while his father was trying to read in the den.

The family dog was lying in the den, and as the screeching sounds of little Harold's violin reached the dogs ears, he began to howl loudly.

The father listened to the dog and the violin as long as he could. Then he jumped up, slammed his paper to the floor and yelled above the noise, "For pity's sake, Harold can't you play something the dog doesn't know?"

This morning I may share some things with you that you do not know, but I hope these things will help us understand Isaiah, his call, and his prophetic ministry better.

Sermon:

How we read and understand scripture today is more the product of the eighteenth-century European intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment than it is about having an accurate translation of scripture from the original languages. During this period, primarily among Europe's elite with some trickle-down benefits for the emerging middle-class and peasant classes, great emphasis was placed upon individuality, the scientific method, personal liberties, progress, religious tolerance, fraternity, constitutional governments, and the separation of church and state. Such ideas would eventually undermine the monarchies of Europe and the static dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church, paving the way for many of the political and social revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, including the American Revolution.¹

¹ Wikipedia contributors. "Age of Enlightenment." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 18 May. 2018. Web. 21 May. 2018.

However, for my purposes this morning I want to do a broad-brush contrast of certain Enlightenment ideas with the world of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. I think by doing so we can glean a broader and deeper understanding of the Prophet Isaiah's call, his message, and its applications for our life and times, which may be very appropriate for Memorial Day.

As Professors Malina and Rohrbaugh, two religious sociologists explain, it is common in the contemporary western world to think of politics, the economic system, and religion as distinct social institutions (and to make arguments about keeping them separate). However, this was not the case in antiquity. In the world of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament only two institutions existed: kinship and politics. Neither religion nor economics had a separate institutional existence or were conceived of as systems on their own. Economics was rooted in the family and governed by political and kinship considerations, not economic rules or principles.

Religion, likewise, had no separate institutional existence in the modern sense. Religion was embedded in the political and kinship spheres. There was domestic religion run by the family and/or political religion run by the kings, aristocrats, and Temple priests. Thus, there was no separate abstract entity called religion run by purely "religious" personnel. Thus, the Temple was never a religious institution separate from its political dimensions. Nor was worship ever separate from what one did in the home. Religion then was the source of meaning for the two fundamental systems, politics and kinship, as they were put into practice. Therefore, it would be incorrect for us to read back into scriptures the modern ideas of individuality, personal or civil liberties, the separation of church and state, or economics.²

Keeping all this in mind, I now invite you to see Isaiah for what he really was, a prophetic, political activist, addressing his Judean world and its issues with God's message.

The presenting problems for Isaiah over much of his prophetic life was Judah's kings, particularly Ahaz and Hezekiah, along with their supporting priestly and landed aristocracy. Ahaz and Hezekiah were constantly trying to affect national security through various political alliances, which naturally entailed idolatrous, religious accommodations since there was not separation of religion and politics. In short, for Isaiah, Judah's national security did not lack the right alliances; but rather, it lacked a faithful relationship with God. Judah, its leaders, and its tag-along-come-along people needed to repent, turn around, and get back on track with God's will.

Isaiah himself was from a well to do priestly family and a member of the elite. Our scriptures today recount an event in Isaiah's life, probably when he was a young priest, as he attended or officiated in a New Year's celebration. The celebration was a reenactment of the cycle of the seasons with all the pomp of re-seating the King on the throne for a New Year.

Suddenly, in a moment of altered consciousness, the boundaries between imagination and reality dissolved and the courtly setting became transfigured into an "other-worldly" scene. The King was personified as God, King of the Universe, in his regal setting. The priests and functionaries became heavenly beings who attended the Most Holy. Isaiah's imagination became his occasion of seeing and understanding himself and his people in a totally divine perspective.

In those moments of profound reverie, Isaiah came to understand that Yahweh alone is the sovereign power of all reality, not just one god among the gods. Yahweh alone determines reality, history, and the fates of nations. With other-world clarity, Isaiah experienced the awesome and terrible dimension of God's holiness.

² Bruce Malina; Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Kindle Locations 6739-6755). Kindle Edition.

The attendant seraphim shielded themselves from [God's] dazzling radiance as they cried: "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts"

In his vision, Isaiah became self-conscious and in fear of not only his but that of his people's impiety. That is, the way the leaders and the aristocracy, the guardians of God's people, were behaving and relating to God and others dishonored God and God's holy nature, inviting dreadful consequences.

"...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 eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Given the radical divide between God's nature and human nature, God takes the initiative to cleanse and reorient this young priest so he can become God's spokesman.

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to [him], holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched his mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

Here we see that Isaiah's own offenses against God as a member of the status quo are blotted out and he hears God ask, *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* And, Isaiah said, (whether out loud to the chagrin of those around him or just to himself) *"Here am I; send me!"* ⁹*And God said, "Go and say to this people:"* "This people" are the members of Isaiah's own social class, members of the royal court, the aristocracy, and the Temple priesthood.

Isaiah goes to these leaders and tells them that they are missing the mark as God's holy people. The opinion leaders and rulers of Judah are to forsake alliances with heathen nations that compromise their relationship to God and God's people because they are to be holy; that is, separated unto God and God alone. As guardians of God's people, they are to rely on God and God's ways for their safety and well-being, not their prideful, human contrivances and compromises with idolatrous nations. Isaiah will say this repeatedly even though Judah's leadership will become more and more self-deluded by pride and eventually desperation.

There is only one hope for the people as they face the threat of invasion from the powerful Assyrians. The people must trust in God. God tells Isaiah to tell the people, *"If you will not be sure, [faithful] you cannot be secure."* And those who have faith in God have nothing to worry about; they don't need to panic when things look bad. God is, in truth, the sovereign God of all nations and the fate of God's people's lies in God's hands not in human machinations of self-reliance.

Isaiah never backed down from his commitment to proclaim God's will and ways. Isaiah used his imagination, his mind, and his social position to serve God. He was fearless, frank, and confrontational. He was brutal in his denunciation of the aristocracy and their gluttony, land grabbing, and social injustices. And, Isaiah's compassion and concern for the truly victimized never waned. The court of the king, the halls of the rich and powerful were never without God's voice while Isaiah was around. All this cost Isaiah big time, but he never turned aside once he said, *"Here I am, send me."* He went and he did.

Okay, how do we western post-Enlightenment, highly individualistic, politically and economically empowered individuals understand Isaiah's prophetic call to address the ruling classes of his time? I think it is obvious - Isaiah, as an individual, responded to a call from God to address all that was wrong and contrary to God's will and ways for the common good. However, first, he acknowledged his own part in what was wrong and then the failures of his people, the

ruling classes. Therefore, we as modern, politically empowered people of God are likewise to open ourselves up to be purged and cleansed of our complicity in things not being as God desires, and then, we too, are to address what is contrary to God's will and ways in our leaders, our society, and the world.

As I look around at the moral, spiritual, political, and cultural decadence of this nation and the world, I often ask the questions, "What is wrong with people?" "What is wrong with this nation?" "What is wrong with the world?" Hasn't anyone learned anything from history? Or, have they learned only the wrong things; that is, how to get away with it next time?

Being so clueless is not unlike those people on a passenger ship, seeing a bearded man on a small island, who is shouting and desperately waving his hands.

"Who is it?" a passenger asks the captain.

"I've no idea. Every year when we pass, he goes nuts."

How easily people forget that God's laws are the ways of life and there are terrible consequences to pay for breaking them sooner or later. It seems that each generation must re-learn the lessons that what is in the common good is usually in the individual's good and vice-versa.

Isaiah comes away from his encounter with a heightened sense of God's power and presence, giving him a new sense of meaning and purpose for his life. In words, more common to our New Testament, Isaiah as a member of the establishment was reborn, purged, cleansed, and reoriented towards God's will in a new way.

My friends, many individuals, not to mention nations, in their attempts to get along, go along, making compromises with forces that are blatant enemies of God, humankind, and all life as we know it. Many people today, including many religious people, seem to go out of their way to avoid the call of the Holy. Like the kings Ahaz and Hezekiah, leaders and citizens alike have turned their back on trusting God's holy ways - and, how is that working out? It seems that even many Christians want only enough of the presence of the Holy to make them feel comfortable in the face of uncertainty and death but not enough to radically alter their nature to help build a world in God's image not humanity's.

I am not talking escapism or some air-headed, religious naiveté here, anything but. As faithful believers, we must use the best of modern science, technology, and human understandings to fulfill our responsibilities to ourselves, our families, others, and all life on this planet, and who knows maybe life beyond this planet. We are entitled by God to enjoy the fruits of our labors, our relationships to family and friends, and all the pleasures of the good life. However, such things are to be understood as the benefits and testimonies to living by God's ways, not testimonies to our egos and our efforts alone. And, in living by God's ways we find peace, joy, and a profound sense of ourselves and our value before the Holy of All Existence. We become better people and our communities, our nations, our world becomes a saner and a safer place to be either human or creature.

We may extrapolate from Isaiah that the only hope for humanity lies in God taking the initiative to purge, cleanse, and to make us acceptable before the Holy. And, as Christians we believe God took that initiative in Jesus the Christ. Jesus is not only our example for being a holy person; that is, separated unto God, but he was God's means of purging and cleansing us for divine ends and purposes, one of which is to go tell this people about God's will and demands for the human community.

Our hope, the world's hope, is that people will be willing to make more room for God in their lives, which is to say let's give God some elbow room to work and watch what happens. Let

us give God room to remove not only our moral unwholesomeness but also our unholy religious, political, and economic perspectives.

But, for that to happen each person, who has had a moment of encounter with the Holy, must be willing to say, "Here I am Lord, send me" to whomever, wherever, whenever, and really mean it. However, be careful if you say this because it may cost you big time on this side of life just as it did Isaiah. However, this isn't all there is to life, is it?

Bibliography

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