



## Comfort and Challenge: Prophetic Preaching in Pentecost

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The Pentecost season is a good time to try preaching from some of the great Old Testament texts. During this half-year, when the lectionary departs from the chronological life of Jesus, the preacher can feel free to explore the insights provided by several wonderful Old Testament passages. Let us take a brief look at six of these lessons and think about some possibilities for preaching.

### *Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: 1 Kings 19:9-18*

Elijah has just experienced one of the greatest victories ever achieved by a biblical prophet. God had come to light the flame on Mt. Carmel after all the Baal prophets had failed; the rains had arrived to end the drought; and the prophets of Baal had been slain. Elijah had dared to put God to the test, and God had complied. Not surprisingly Jezebel is mad, and Elijah, suddenly depressed and fearful, flees to the south. He sets his sights toward the mountain where God had appeared in power and glory to deliver the Law to Moses. Perhaps Elijah wants, and needs, a theophany, an appearance of God, similar to that given to Moses, in order to bolster his sagging spirits.

The theophany, however, seems much less spectacular than Elijah had hoped. The traditional manifestations of an appearance by God—wind, earthquake, fire—pass by without any sight or sound from God. Then comes the “still

small voice” (RSV), or “sound of sheer silence” (NRSV), or (possibly) “sound of crushed silence.” The best translation of this phrase is elusive. At any rate, the intention seems to be to accent the “sheer” silence in contrast to all the banging and noisiness of a typical theophanic experience.

Several ideas that could be explored:

1. Servants of God sometimes get depressed, fearful, and wonder if they are the only ones still alive who care about God’s purpose in the world. This seems true even when we have recently been successful. We quickly forget what God has done for us when a new crisis appears. At such times, God will listen to our complaints and try to win us back to a place of confidence.

2. When we need an appearance or a word from God, God will provide it, but we may not recognize it because it comes in ways we had not expected. In fact, God’s revelation may not come in the spectacular, miraculous, glitzy, or awe-inspiring. Rather, God appears in the quiet,

the ordinary, the mundane. If we are not attentive, we may miss it and not know that God has actually been there.

3. There is a time to get on with it, to get back to work, to carry out God's mission. God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (v. 13). Elijah was down, he needed a lift, assurance from God, a sense of direction. Now it is time to move on, not to linger on the mountain, hoping that the next religious experience will be even better than the last one. God has specific tasks in mind for Elijah (and us?) to do. Spiritual renewal is important. It is not an end in itself. Elijah's assignments are very specific, even involving political action and arranging for the transference of prophetic power to the next generation. This story reminds us of the transfiguration story, where God appears and makes some specific affirmations about Jesus. There, as here, a time comes to leave the mountain and get back to the work that God has given us to do.

*Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8*

This is a wonderful text that explores the desire of God to include all people, to make God's house a house of prayer for all people (v. 7), and to gather the outcasts of Israel (v. 8). The Old Testament is often thought of as the story of a people who are more interested in protecting themselves from outside influences than in sharing what they know about the one true God; a people who jealously grasp God as their protector against outside hostile forces. This stereotype is only marginally true. Some passages (as in Joshua and Judges) can be understood in such a narrow sense, but they do not represent the norm for God's people, whether in the Old Testament or the Christian church.

Certainly this section of Isaiah is full of references to Israel as a light to the nations, proclaiming an inclusiveness that wants to bring together before God those who had previously been excluded (whether outcasts within Israel or because they were foreigners). I still remember vividly my experience in graduate school when I came upon this passage during my reading of much of the Old Testament in Hebrew. For several weeks I had been plodding along through the stories of kings and their failures, the pain of the lament psalms, the terrible

punishments predicted by the prophets if the people refused to change. Then came the glorious words of restoration and recovery that begin with Isaiah 40. Isaiah 56 particularly stands out with its specific references to the eunuch (an outcast within the community) and the foreigner (an outcast because not part of the people of Israel). I remember being so moved by these words that it was almost like a religious experience, a holy time, a special gift from God, in the midst of those academic studies.

Unfortunately, the lectionary leaves out verses 2-5, thus denying the very inclusiveness that the text supports. The foreigner is still there, but not the eunuch. Why? Your guesses are probably as good as mine. Perhaps it is uncomfortable to talk about eunuchs in church. When our children ask what is a eunuch, we may be forced to answer them. Better not to bring it up. Of course, this is not a time when we are comfortable talking about any kind of sexual deviation. Many denominations are worried about how to get around some of the controversies that are looming close by, threatening to divide congregations and church bodies over issues of sexuality. How can we be in favor of eunuchs and still opposed to other forms of sexuality that do not fit

the norm? Better not to bring it up. Of course, by our lack of courage, we have lost a wonderful image of the radicality and inclusiveness of God's grace.

Who are the eunuchs and foreigners of our day? Who are the Samaritans, tax collectors, and sinners? How and in what way are they to be included in God's "house of prayer for all peoples"? What must they do to get inside our communities of faith? What must they first repent and/or change? How easy is it for a eunuch to be other than he is?

*Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Isaiah 51:1-6*

This passage contains strong words of encouragement for people who have been through terrible times. Perhaps their situation is still awful and words of hope are not easy to believe. They may sound like wishful thinking, pious optimism, a futile blowing in the wind. So the prophet works hard to present his message of hope in as convincing away as possible. His words may also be helpful to us in our own times of exile and devastation.

1. Look back to your origins, your personal and family history, your spiritual ancestors (such as Abraham and Sarah). Remember who you are and the promises that God has given to you. Think about your baptism and what that means. Remind yourselves of the stories of those who went before you (in the Bible, in your own family, and elsewhere), who acted on promises that, in spite of delays and struggle, were eventually fulfilled. Remember how God never abandoned them, and, likewise, will never abandon you.

We look to the past to find hope for the future. Someone has been there ahead of us. We are not the first to endure such hardships and suffering. They did not lose their faith, God persisted, and salvation came. It will happen again.

2. God's salvation will be very specific to our needs and it will come soon. Jerusalem will again be a garden, where joy and happiness abound, where songs of

thanksgiving will again be sung. What has been missing will be restored. What has been lost will be found. God is attentive to what we need to achieve fullness of life. God will act accordingly- and swiftly (v. 5). The time of waiting is nearly over.

How convincing are these words? How long can we endure? How soon is God planning to act? Is this really a time of deliverance or must we wait still longer? Other places in the Bible remind us that time is relative. God's time may be different from ours. A thousand years to us may be as a day to God. As the prophet writes these words, he expects that relief will come soon, and the history of Israel bears that out. The exile did end. The scattered people of Israel were allowed to go home. Will it be the same for us?

3. Our hope must stretch beyond the hopes of this world if it is to survive all our experiences that continue to threaten hope. Maybe relief won't come right away. Maybe one tyranny will be replaced by another. Maybe the illness will become chronic or terminal. Maybe the broken family will never be reconciled.

As confident as the prophet is about the immediacy of relief, he leaves us with a hope that is more profound than what we can perceive with our senses. If even heaven (the sky?) vanishes like smoke, the earth wears out like old clothes, and people die like gnats, there is still room for hope. God speaks: "But my salvation will be forever and my deliverance will never be ended" (v. 6). There is room for hope even if all our experiences indicate otherwise. This is no easy

optimism. The prophet faces directly even such dire possibilities as the end of the world as we know it. Even that is not enough to kill hope, because God's salvation is forever. We are reminded of Jesus' words that even if heaven and earth should pass away, his words will not pass away. That is a hope that can survive our harshest experiences and hardest questions.

*Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Jeremiah 15:15-21*

Jeremiah has sometimes been called the "crying prophet." Indeed, his was not a happy life. God had given him a hard job to do, sending him to speak a critical word to people who were very resistant to his message. He became alienated from most of the people. At first, he is thought of as a crank, an unhappy prophet of doom, "crazy old Jeremiah," whom nice people would never invite to their dinner party. Later, when his predictions of disaster can no longer be dismissed, when destruction by Babylon seems certain and imminent, then the coming disaster is somehow Jeremiah's fault. The messenger is blamed for the content of the message.

The book of Jeremiah contains a rich mixture of prophetic oracles, biographic narratives about Jeremiah's life, and a series of laments (they used to be called "confessions") by Jeremiah. In these laments, Jeremiah speaks painfully of his experience as a prophet. Our text is one of these laments followed by a response from God.

1. What does Jeremiah say? Jeremiah asks for a number of things that we may think are not appropriate for a pious servant of God. Some may be tempted to be critical of Jeremiah because of what he says. He asks for retribution on his persecu-

tors (v. 15). He reminds God that he is in this situation because God had talked him into it. At first, God's words had seemed a joy and delight. Eventually, the consequence of speaking them had led to estrangement from the enjoyment of life and a feeling of incurable pain that could never be healed. Then comes the accusation that God had dealt with him deceitfully, luring him into a vocation that seemed promising at first but has brought him nothing but misery.

2. How does God respond? God urges Jeremiah to hang in there, not to turn away from God and from the words that must be said. If he does this, his persecutors will turn to him and he will not give in to them. God does not say that it will be easy. There will be enemies for the one who speaks God's message to a hostile world. Jeremiah's assurance is that God will be there to be sure that they will not defeat him. God will deliver him from whatever dangers arise.

3. To lament is legitimate. Here is a place for the preacher to talk about the lament tradition in the Bible. Many people in our pews will be critical of Jeremiah who wants vengeance on his enemies, whines in self-pity, and accuses God of deceiving him. Similarly, they would be critical of themselves if such thoughts ever entered their minds in times of trouble. They would assume that they are not good Christians for reacting in such a way, and they would do their best not to let anyone know what they were really thinking and feeling.

There is a place for lament in our lives. As with Jeremiah, our prayer should be honest, and if we have a case to make with (or against) God, we should do it. The inclusion of material like this in the Bible gives us an invitation to dare to talk straight about what is happening in our lives and not to pretend we are better off than we really are. We hope that we do not get into a situation like Jeremiah's where such a prayer is necessary. If it is, however, better to let it out than to deny reality. When we speak to God about such things, we will find assurance that there

is no enemy too strong to defeat us, that God will be with us, and together we will achieve the victory.

*Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Ezekiel 33:7-11*

Ezekiel gives us another slant on the difficulties inherent in being one of God's prophets. (We have seen aspects of this already in Elijah and Jeremiah.) One of the functions of a prophet is to be a sentinel, a watchman, a lookout who sees the danger coming and tries to rouse people out of their doldrums before it is too late. As we saw with Jeremiah, reluctant listeners will not take kindly to the bad news and may, in fact, blame the messenger and make his life miserable (and even kill him if they get the chance). Since this is true, it would not be unusual for the prophet to draw back from the harsh message in order to avoid this difficult confrontation. Tell people good news, what they want to hear. Find out what their needs are and cater to those needs. Don't tell them something that will put them off or they will find another church where they won't be offended.

This word from Ezekiel seems to be addressed to the messenger who is balking, who doesn't want to speak the word of warning. God makes it clear that the sentinel is called to warn the people. If she or he does not do that, then he or she

is responsible for their fate. On the other hand, if the sentinel does speak the word of warning, then, whether people heed it or not is their own business, not the responsibility of the sentinel.

Two further points to be made:

1. These pointed words to the sentinel make clear that God takes no pleasure in bringing punishment. God wants people to live and not die. God wants people to make the choices that will enhance their life and not lead to terrible consequences for themselves or others. So God depends on sentinels who will do their job of speaking the truth, even if unpopular, in order to persuade their listeners to do what is necessary to prevent disaster. These are not the words of a judgmental God who can't wait to punish people who are disobedient. Rather, this is the pleading of a loving God who wants people to succeed, be happy, live.

2. So who is God calling to be sentinels in our day? Is this the task of the preacher? Can the one who is hired by a community of people to preach good news, make them feel good, help them through their trials and life transitions, also be a sentinel who warns them when it is apparent that continuation of destructive behavior will lead to great unpleasantness? What is tough love? Who carries on the prophetic functions of the church? Is this properly a lay rather than priestly function? The Ezekiel text should raise for all of us the question whether or not we are called to such a task. If we are so called and do not act, then responsibility for the fate of those who never had a chance to hear the warning falls on us.

*Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Genesis 50:15-21*

The conclusion to the Joseph story raises some exciting and far-reaching theological themes. Let us take a look at three of them:

1. Forgiveness: Joseph's brothers are terrified now that their father Jacob has died. They are well aware of their sin committed against their brother Joseph. From a human perspective, they expect that he will get even with them, that he will seek revenge. Up to now he was

inhibited by his desire not to bring any more grief to his father. Now their father is gone and there is nothing to hold back Joseph from punishing them. They tell Joseph that Jacob's dying wish was that he forgive them. We do not know if that is true. At least, it shows how desperate they were to use every device they knew to persuade Joseph to forgive.

Their hopes are fulfilled. Joseph forgives them. The family that has known disruption, favoritism, hostility, and deceit all through the book of Genesis may finally get its act together. There is hope for reconciliation. One marvels at the graciousness of Joseph who is actually able to forgive after all of this.

2. Suffering for others: We continue to search for ways to find meaning in our suffering. Sometimes (surely, not always), suffering turns out to be for the benefit of other people. Because Joseph had to bear the suffering of slavery in Egypt, he was in the right place at the right time to save many people from famine. What looked like a hopeless life of slavery in a foreign land turned out to be a way in which many people were saved. Joseph's suffering had some meaning after all, though he could not see that until he got to the end of the story. Likewise, with

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enough hindsight, we may find that our suffering, at least in part, has had some benefit for self or others.

3. God's will and human sin: Since the story had a happy ending, one might be tempted to say that it was all God's will. God needed Joseph in Egypt to plan for the famine. Did God persuade the brothers to sell him as a slave in order to accomplish God's purposes? Or did the brothers do it on their own, committing a sinful act against their own brother? The Joseph story attempts to say that both are true. The brothers really did sin. It is never nice to sell your brother as if he were a commodity. Yet God was at work in all of this, even in the sins that humans commit. God is always working toward the good, even when what we do is wrong, hateful, evil. God does not cause us to sin. Neither does God leave us alone to bear the results of our wrongdoing. Even what seems a disaster, a terrible experience of suffering, can be redeemed by a loving God and changed into something good. This we also know in a deeply profound way in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

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