

“Anxiety’s Opposite”
Queen Lili’uokalani Sunday
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Religion is so often disappointing.
What is supposed to be life-giving so often seems dry.
What is supposed to bring people together so often divides people.
What is supposed to grant meaning can as easily confuse.

In Isaiah’s time, there was no such thing as religion, per se.
The lines that modern people so easily draw between politics and culture, religion and other facets of human society, simply did not exist in the year Isaiah began his prophetic vocation, ca. 742 BC.
The blurry lines between the sociopolitical milieu and the cultic practice of the day are evident in Isaiah 6:2.
Isaiah dates his famous vision in the temple as having happened “the day King Uzziah died.”

The day King Uzziah died; things were not looking good for Israel’s southern kingdom. The people had lost their way, had forgotten who they were, whose they were, and had forgotten their purpose as a people.
They had forgotten the purpose of their worship, had seduced themselves into thinking that God desires sacrifice for its own sake, rather than as sign of a change of heart.
They had forgotten that their God, the God of Israel, who is also Creator of the Universe, desires that Israel become a distinctive society, one characterized by concern for the least - the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow, namely, those customarily left out of a patriarchal, urban-centered, property-ownership based society.

Prophets themselves can be disappointing.
When we need a word of hope, they offer gloom.
When we need a plan, they provide poetry instead.
We expect them to do their job, to accurately describe the future so that we can prepare for it.
Isn’t that what prophets, Isaiah included, as supposed to be able to do?
What we find when we actually risk reading the Bible, is that prophetic work is not about magical foretelling or luckily guesses regarding the future.
Biblical prophecy is more nearly looking deeply into the present through values and lessons inherited from the past.
Prophets describe, through image and poetry, what may be found there.
Prophets name what is broken.
Prophets voice grief.
Prophets articulate deep disappointments.

So, if you find yourself deeply disappointed these days, disappointed with your government, your culture, your church, if you find yourself disillusioned by those people or institutions you once trusted, if you find yourself at times enraged by the ways things are, by the way people greedily compete for resources, by the way self-

interest rules the day, by the way leaders have an excuse for why the status quo must be maintained, then you have at least the beginning of a prophetic sensibility. Prophetic work begins in acknowledging deep disappointment.

Though, there must be something to prompt disappointment.

Disappointment names a loss.

So that while prophetic work finds its feet in articulating what has been lost, it begins with a deep love of people,

A deep love of the possibilities of common life,

A deep love of God who is anything but static, who provides new alternatives to the ways of greed, self-aggrandizement, and “the way things are.”

A couple of years ago, just before my son, Marin, was born, I read an article in Mothering Magazine (yes, dads can be mothers too).

The article was about raising an environmentally-conscious child.

It made a powerful point, addressing the prevailing outrage with regard to staggering environmental problems.

You can teach your child to be similarly outraged, the article argued, not by pointing out everything that is wrong with the earth and human stewardship of it, but by pointing out the earth’s beauty.

Teach your children to love the columbine, the heron, the red rock, the mountain lion and their outrage will be stoked when that love, that beauty, that vouchsafed treasure, is threatened.

In the first chapter of the book of Isaiah, the prophet describes a woeful state of affairs.

In verse 10 of that chapter, he addresses the rulers, those with power and wealth, and he invokes the names of those infamous twin cities of old, Sodom and Gomorrah. Unfortunately, contemporary politics of homophobia and heterosexism have trained us, like Pavlov’s dogs, to drool the assumption that these cities were destroyed because of immoral sexual behavior.

In fact, the weight of the biblical narrative, if we have the energy and courage to consider it, affirms that the fault of these cities was not foremostly sexual.

The use of sex as an instrument of abuse was an example of its greater fault, which was, according to the four references in Isaiah: the lack of neighborliness.

Biblical neighborliness should not be confused with smiling and waving at the person who lives next door.

According to Walter Brueggemann, neighborliness in the biblical context constitutes an alternative way of organizing society, that is,

caring for rather than competing with,

assisting the least rather than rewarding the rich,

and this sort of neighborliness as alternative to the prevailing culture requires acknowledging that God and God alone is our ultimate authority.

Human leaders are always subject to God’s authority.

Isaiah’s rhetoric attacks the use of cultic ritual to manipulate God’s will.

Isaiah speaks particularly of the practice of sacrifice.

Verse 11: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.”

I have had enough of this, God says.

Does this strike any of you as intriguing, even exciting?

In these verses of Isaiah, God himself rails against worship.

It’s like God is saying, you all think that you can just come to church, say prayers, preach sermons, sing hymns, and call it a day. Back to the grind of a week.

All of that means nothing to me.

What I want is changed hearts.

What I desire is that you would care for the least among you.

Why should I listen to your prayers, your preaching, your singing?

You come to worship with blood on your hands. What’s more, you don’t even know it.

Verses 16 and 17: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Sound familiar? This is the theme taken up by Micah and by other prophets, each in their own way.

Practicing religion in the form of worship is abhorrent to God if divorced from neighborly concern for the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the ignored, the discriminated, the disabled, and the lost.

It’s not that we can or should try to somehow imagine a religion-less society; such was tried and failed throughout history, most recently in the Soviet Union.

But neither can or should we imagine that we can separate our religious commitments and practices from our concern for our neighbor.

It would be better to utter no prayer at all than to utter a self-serving prayer to a God who demands justice.

Take note, preachers of prosperity. God is not interested in individual or even national prosperity at the expense of others.

God is interested in the mutual prosperity of people, with no one fending themselves. In God’s economy, people fend for each other.

Most of us have had the experience of having been told, “I’m disappointed in you.”

It might have been a parent, a spouse, our child, a coach, a teacher, a friend.

Rarely could such an experience be described as uplifting or even helpful, but we must come to grips with the reality that our thoughts and actions are at times disappointing to God.

We live in a society that has no healthy public way of admitting wrong-doing. Our president is, of course, easy to pick on, but he is emblematic. Has your administration made any mistakes? Hem. Haw. Incapable.

The church has a way of admitting fault - confession, but as is the case with so many elements of our tradition, the effect of this practice creates the opposite effect. So many of us, when we even hear the word confession, let alone utter the words printed in our bulletin, feel a strange mix of guilt and resistance. Somewhere along the way, we learned that guilt, that is, constantly feeling bad about oneself, is a necessary burden, or we learned that it is a feeling to be avoided at all costs.

In verse 18, Isaiah utters poetry in God's voice:

"Come now, let us argue it out... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

God offers, in confession a new word, a new possibility.

The possibility that our guilt can and will be taken away.

This is the promise of the practice of confession.

The act of Christian Confession plays out in three movements:

First, the utterance of truth, the deep, harsh, beautiful, "Yes" truth of our shortcomings.

Truth never white-washes or sanitizes, nor does it beef up or dramatize.

To speak confessional truth is to search for imperfect words that pry open an acknowledgement in the heart that things are not as they should be or need to be.

Confessional truth acknowledges that no sin is merely individual.

Sin is always a web. Simple moralizing does not apply.

Confessional truth always takes humble responsibility.

The second movement is waiting.

Some of you may spend this "silent confession" portion of our service for such an opportunity.

Speak the truth, then wait.

Let the truth echo in God's cavern. Wait.

Let God's silence absorb what you have acknowledged. Wait.

Resist the temptation to figure out, to solve, and to make amends.

There is something at work deep below the surface.

God's breath is blowing across the realities of your life.

Wait in the dark. Wait in the silence. Wait.

And then, impossibly, assurance.

The steadfast and merciful one responds: You are forgiven.

Just as the word "forgiven" asserts, we receive God's mercy as if it was "given before" we ever intended to confess.

God is that steadfast, that willing to forgive, that abounding in grace.

But beware, lest you think that God's forgiveness in any way let's you "off the hook" or looks the other way.

Forgiveness is the opposite of a free pass.

Isaiah makes this painfully clear by uttering one of God's many big "ifs".

And it's not an "if" we're going to like or receive easily in this modern, enlightened congregation. Are you ready? Of course you aren't.

Verse 19 and 20: If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword."

Forgiveness is the demand and the means of a transformed life, a new life committed to the cessation of doing evil, committed to doing good, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, pleading for the widow for the purpose of creating an abundant and healthy common life, symbolized by the words, eating "the good of the land."

This is what we are to be willing and obedient to.

God's will, as inconvenient as it may be to us, is that we would pay attention to our neighbor.

To not obey this will is to spell our own demise, to set into motion all of the facets of our society about which so many of us are so disappointed.

We rebel against the neighborly God and choose war-making over peace-making.

We rebel against the neighborly God and choose luxury over healthcare.

We rebel against the neighborly God and choose engines over the ice caps.

We rebel against the neighborly God and choose to give our attention to mind-numbing entertainment over our children and elderly.

God is not as afraid of our sins as we are.

"Come now, let us argue it out."

Bring it on, Isaiah's God, and our God, says.

What do you got? Give me your best shot.

Give me the chance to break the illusions of your own innocence.

Give me the chance to bear what you won't even admit to yourself, let alone your therapist.

Give me the chance to receive unbearable truth and give it back to you as the very opportunity you so long for to change your whole life.

Be careful now.

This is a strange God, introduced today to you by Isaiah, and known in many ways by the men and women of the Bible.

This is the God who emboldens and receives your confession.

If you don't think confession makes any difference, maybe you shouldn't bother with it.

And if you think it is too demanding, maybe you shouldn't take the risk. The truth might be too hot to hold.

Then again, it just might set you free. Set all of us free. No disappointment there. Amen.