

Sermon for Sunday, August, 11 2019

**RUNNING ON EMPTY**  
Isa. 1:10-20 / Lk. 12:32-34

By now, we are knee-deep in a season of the lectionary, where the ancient prophets shine a light unsparing on God's people. First it was Amos's turn, who chastised his own for forging unholy political alliances. Then, Hosea took over by likening the behavior of God's people to that of an unfaithful spouse running after false gods. And today, Isaiah gets to chime in. Without any major introduction or warning as to what's coming, the ancient prophet launches into a tirade without equal toward the Israelites. For six long chapters, he hurls one invective after another at them, and that's before we even get to his "call." No wonder the prophet doesn't want to sign up for the gig considering the message he just had to deliver on God's behalf. He knew the people would run him out of town on a rail ... if he got lucky.

For starters, Isaiah throws the most terrible insults at them. "You rulers of Sodom, you people of Gomorrah." Well, actually, it's not Isaiah who is doing the insulting. He is just God's human megaphone. His audience then, and his audience today—us—knows about the fate of these cities whose names stand as a symbol for the worst of the worst. And the Israelites knew, as do we, what happened to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah—the people and their cities were incinerated and reduced to piles of ash.

God's ire as presented through the mouth of Isaiah seems to have one specific purpose. At first glance, God appears unhappy about the worship practices of God's people. "I really don't care at all about your sacrifices. I've had enough of all your burnt offerings and I certainly take no pleasure when you lay all these poor slaughtered creatures on my temple steps. When you come to pray, who asked you to commit all of these atrocities? Don't continue to trample on me like this. Your worship has become a burden to me and I am tired of carrying it. When you come before me, don't show up with blood on your hands."

But I don't think God is merely, shall we say "displeased," with the worship practices of the Israelites. God is not a petulant teenager seeking revenge when things don't go his or her way, and God desires our worship which God made abundantly clear throughout the biblical text. Rather, I think the deeper issue is that God tasks Isaiah to expose the *lack of reverence* with which the people worship and with which they conduct their daily lives.

Paul Woodruff, *Distinguished Teaching Professor of Philosophy at The University of Texas at Austin*, has this to say regarding "reverence." "Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe ... brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. ... Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods." To paraphrase Isaiah, I would simply say: God is God, and we are not.

However clear this might seem, it's easier acknowledged than put into practice. The Israelites thought they were doing the right thing. They were absolutely sure they were doing the right thing. But they got hammered by Isaiah, God's spokesperson, because they were so sure, because they lacked the reverence and humility due to their human limitations. They forgot that the awe of God was the beginning of wisdom and tried to act as if they were in charge of divine things.

We tend to think that we have become masters of our own universe, too. We yield considerable power backed by our technological achievements in every scientific field imaginable. We keep on pushing and pushing to advance human knowledge but our ethical lives have not kept up with the speed of our technological advancement. And our hearts limp along even further behind. Isaiah's words are blunt in reminding us that worship, even when it is well-intended, without corresponding action is like running on empty. And action, even when it is well-intended, without the foundation of worship is like the blind leading the blind.

A lack of reverence for God, for neighbor, for the world we live in, for justice, even a lack of reverence for ourselves is perhaps one of the main reasons for the abysmal state of the world today. We believe we have become gods of our own making. How else do we make sense of the hate that fuels a 21 year old man to drive for hours in order to kill people simply because of their skin color and ethnic identity, or the hate that drives yet another mass shooter to kill mostly women, including his own sister? How else do we explain the utter disregard for our planet which feeds us and provides a home for us? How else do we explain the exploitation of children for all kinds of unholy favors? How else do we make sense ...

At this point, we may want to run into Jesus's arms because the parable he tells us today lacks the harsh rhetoric of the grumpy ancient prophet. But when we look closer, Jesus asks the same thing of us, only in a more circumspect way because he wants us to come and see for ourselves, rather than beat us over the head with a big stick. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," he says. The treasure of which Jesus speaks is God. If God truly is our treasure, our hearts will follow both in worship and proper action, never one without the other. If God truly is our treasure, we will grow in our capacity for reverence and awe for God, the other, and for ourselves.

This is similar to another parable Jesus told about a merchant who was in search of a precious pearl. The merchant gave up all of his possessions and sold everything he had when he found that one pearl in order to obtain it. His heart and his treasure finally had become one. And what are we willing to sell? What are we prepared to give up? What are we willing to sacrifice in order to obtain that one precious pearl? Are we willing to give up our prejudices? Are we ready to sacrifice our anxieties, fears, and preconceived notions? Our attachments and addictions? Our love for ... you fill-in the blank ... where only our love for God, our one true treasure, has its rightful place? Are we prepared to change the way we think is the right way to worship?

You see, Jesus tells us that God will take all of that, everything we think we own, and much more because God is not a big fan of our false gods. And then God requires of us actions that really are not that outrageous or next to impossible to achieve—like, say, world peace. Instead, God wants us to start small. Feeding the hungry. We can, and we are doing that. Standing up for the disenfranchised and those without advocates and without voice. We can, and we are doing that. Treating others like we want to be treated ourselves. Well, I don't know about you, but my record on that one is a bit spotty ...

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," Jesus says. And Isaiah chimes in on God's behalf, "Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD." That, I think, truly shows that God has a great sense of humor. Because, in the end, where our treasure is and where and to whom our hearts and our worshipful actions belong is no argument at all.

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