

January 19, 2020

Great Themes of Scripture: "The Prophets: Radical Traditionalists"

Isaiah 40:27-31

Ezekiel 36:24-27

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We are on week three of great themes of scripture series. Week one we looked at the Exodus and explored the themes of rescue, liberation and freedom. Last week, we looked at the themes of trust and fidelity as we explored the entering into the Promised Land to the period of the kings: Saul, David, and Solomon.

Today, we look at the life and words of the prophets who do not look into the future as much as clearly seeing the present. They do not have great foresight, but rather keen insight. In the present, they listen to the Lord and speak the word they hear from God.

Prophets are seldom establishment people. They often have to confront institutional theology and practices.

All the **prophets** do the same thing:

- First, **they look into the past and see what God has done in history** (the Exodus from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan/the Promised Land, the founding of the kingdom of David), and that pattern is a pattern of salvation: God always loving, God always calling, God always giving new life. They point out to the people that breaking that pattern by not believing in God's love or responding to God's call is walking into death instead of life; and thus headlong into experiencing injustice, oppression and destruction.

- Second, **they looked into the present situation to see which pattern can be detected in the world around them.** Is it a pattern of salvation, leading to life or is it a pattern of sin, leading to death? If so, then they declare it is not the way of God! You're going in the wrong direction.
- Third, and finally, **they see the pattern in the present and warn the people the future will be bad unless they change** because things are not going in the right direction which can only lead to ruin.

Amidst all this, the prophets were for they saw God's love breaking through again, and again, overcoming human doubt and resistance, bringing salvation and new life.

Throughout the words and actions of the prophets we see the themes of the people's sin. **Some prophets point out that the people's sin is pride and self-reliance, and some say there sin is despair,** which they felt when they were taken into exile captured by the Babylonians. But, God always want to save the people from sin. And God always provides love and forgiveness.

There are a set of prophets who speak when the people are released from exile in Babylon and return to their ransacked and destroyed city of Jerusalem. The people wanted to build their own houses first. But Haggai the prophet told them to rebuild the Temple. In the end, the people were disheartened because of their poverty, they could not match the magnificence of the former temple, the one built by King Solomon. It is here through the prophet that we hear that the true glory of the temple was not its gold or silver but God's

own presence residing in it. Our congregation's true glory is not in how beautiful we make it look, but in the spirit of God, the spirit of the people who worship here. The glory of the Church is never the work of our hands but the handiwork of God.

The last image to appear in the prophets is that of **the messiah**. Upon returning from exile the people were poor and still under domination longing for full freedom. Thus, they began to hope for a Messiah, an anointed one, and to dream about how he would appear. We with 2,000 years of influence see this as Jesus. Though earlier prophetic insight could only see that God had not yet come in all God's glory to establish peace and justice on the earth. Is this not a long way from the days where the people thought they heard God telling them to conquer Canaan (like we heard last week), and kill all its inhabitants.

An evolution of faith taking centuries; good news was God was not finished with them or us yet! During the prophets, the people of Israel still held to their provincialism, thinking the messiah would be just for them and imagining that God would somehow set Jerusalem up to rule the world for God.

Even so, we find **a corrective for this narrowness of vision in the book of Jonah** (a revelation given to us in a short story, not based on a real event in Israel's history). It is the message that even though some people come to see themselves as God's chosen one, this does not mean that God has not chosen others as well.

God asked Jonah to go to Ninevah and lead the people to repentance. He resists this call from God and seeks to run away. He tries to escape in a boat and it is then caught in a

violent storm in which he is thrown overboard and swallowed by a big fish and then spit out on dry land. Where is the dry land he finds himself on – Nineveh!. Grudgingly Jonah goes to Nineveh telling them to repent. To his surprise and disgust, they repent! He then sits down in the bright sun boiling in anger. Tenderly, God looks down and makes a tall leafy plant sprout right in front of him to give him some shade. He cools down a bit, but next day discovers the plant has died. Now, he even more enraged. In the end, God tells Jonah who is he to say to whom God can be gracious, or love. Jonah why should you be angry if I am loving? Why should you be stingy, if I am generous?

Before we roll our eyes at Jonah, we too feel the good news is too good to be true. We complain that it cannot be that easy. We believe we have to earn the love of God or at least deserve it somehow. The Church in the past has said the love of God has been restricted to just ourselves, to just the law-abiding, to just those with the right religion or who attend the right church. But, God through the prophets keeps telling us, “Do not place limits on my love. My generosity is unbounded. I love you not because of what you do but because I am love itself. Yet, institutionalized religion still feels it has cornered righteousness. The church at times, is still good at creating and hating heretics. The world still contains Jonahs running from God and universal compassion.

In conclusion, **the prophets speak of a transcendent God who is above all things and yet within all things.** The presence of God is everywhere and there is never any place or event from which God is absent.

The experience of God’s love is a religious experience. It is an experience of grace, of overwhelming beauty, of unbelievable

mercy. It is a gift of forgiveness, of approval, of acceptance despite our sins, despite our guilt, despite our non acceptance of ourselves. To live in love means to live in grace, to be gracious and merciful to others. It means extending them forgiveness and approval and acceptance despite their own sins and guilt feelings. It means loving them even when they don't feel guilty about the evil they are doing. As Jesus said, it even means loving our enemies. Entering into the vision and love of God means having our perception of reality altered and our life direction changed toward the vision and plan of God's unconditional and endless love.

Next week, we will continue the great themes of scripture with a look at both Genesis and Job: God and Humankind, Good and Evil. Stay tuned.