

**A SERMON ON THE OCCASION OF AN INAUGURATION:  
IN THE YEAR THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY, AS WE HAVE KNOWN IT, DIED**

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It was a time of national crisis – “In the year that King Uzziah died” – when Isaiah was given a vision: “I saw the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up.”

We need such a vision today, in the year the American Presidency, as we have known it, died.

**I**

I fear we have elected a man unqualified in knowledge, experience and character to be President of the United States.

I do not judge those who voted for him. How and why we vote is a very complex thing. But I must speak. Jesus said “Love your enemies,” but he also turned tables over in the temple. I remember Jesus calling King Herod Antipas “that fox,” an unflattering term meaning someone of dishonest cunning (Luke 13:32).

Polling suggests that 81% of white evangelicals voted for him – which has, for now, ruined the name Evangelical for me. (I should note that there were some prominent Evangelical leaders who opposed Trump.) He exposed the shadow-side of evangelicalism and of the American soul: hatred and fear of women, *misogyny*; a hatred and fear of those who are different, *xenophobia*; a mix of conscious and unconscious *racism*; a *hyper-nationalism*, and a worship of worldly power. (I should add that there is a difference between a worthy patriotism and an unworthy nationalism.) Evangelicals, even with their love of Jesus, have not been able to escape the shadow-side of the American soul.

Donald Trump is an anti-President who has assembled a cabinet with an anti-Attorney General, an anti-Education Secretary, an anti-Energy Secretary, an anti-Labor Secretary, an anti-Environmental Protection Agency Director, an anti-Housing and Urban Development Secretary, and an anti-Health and Human Services Secretary.

There has been a growing anti-government spirit in America which has reached its apotheosis in the Trump Presidency. White nationalist and white supremacist groups have hailed Trump as their hero. Hate attracts hate.

## II

When Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up, he was reassured: *What is truly important is not who is sitting on Israel's throne, but who is sitting on the heavenly throne.* Seraphim flew around the throne singing "Holy, holy, holy." The foundations of the temple shook and smoke filled the temple.

In view of the holiness and glory of God, Isaiah cried out in heart-rending confession: "Woe is me. For I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." It is personal confession and national confession.

Is there room in our hearts for such confession, that we are a people of misogyny, xenophobia, racism, hyper-nationalism, and a lust for wealth and power? Consciously or unconsciously, these are our national sins. You might call them sins of humanity in general, but they were in ascendancy during the Presidential election season. We cannot lessen our sins without acknowledging them.

Then one of the seraphim took a hot coal from the altar and placed it on Isaiah's mouth and said, "Your guilt is taken away and your sin is forgiven." In the New Testament,

forgiveness means “to loose” or “be loosed.” Isaiah was loosed, set free, from his sins and the sins of his people.

For what purpose? Not for individual cleansing alone, but that the nation be cleansed.

The Voice of the Lord said, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” The personal cleansing was for the sake of a call to go to the people of Israel and speak forth God’s word and God’s vision for the world. Isaiah answered, full of faith and courage: “Here I am, send me.”

So Isaiah went forth, and it would not be easy. As the text goes on to say:

They would see and see and not understand;

They would hear and hear and not perceive;

Their hearts would be fat,

Their ears heavy,

Their eyes shut.

“How long, O Lord,” Isaiah cried, “will it be like this?” And God said, in effect, it will take awhile, and it will get worse before it gets better.

But as the saying goes, anything worth doing will not be easy.

I believe God is calling forth a *prophetic community* for such a time as this. They will be a minority voice but a vital voice. They will be, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “morally maladjusted” to the way things are. They will call America away from its lesser angels and back to “the better angels of our nature,” to use the phrase of Abraham Lincoln.

### III

What this President lacks is the personal and civic virtue of *reverence*: a sense of awe about the true greatness of America and its ideals, and an acute understanding of the limits of human knowledge, power and goodness.

Reverence is what brings a lump in the throat when you see the Lincoln Memorial, or see a flag raised, or hear taps at a funeral, or encounter soldiers going to, or coming home, from war. Reverence is what you feel when you hear the words of the Gettysburg Address: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that ‘all men are created equal.’”

Reverence happens when you see a baby born, when you see *every* person born in the image of God and with eternal worth: rich, poor, gay, straight, women, men, educated and uneducated, Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist, black, white, brown and a million shades of skin.

Reverence happens when you “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Or, as stated in the *Qur’an*:

None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you  
love for yourself.

Reverence was what Isaiah experienced in the Temple the year King Uzziah died and heard God’s call to send him to create a *reverence movement* in a world of irreverence and false reverence.

A prophetic community sees clearly the evidence of what is, but lives beyond the evidence to what God wants us to be as a people.

A prophetic community sees what Isaiah saw and answers God's call and sings with the hymn,

This is my Father's world,  
O, let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the ruler yet.

#### IV

Jesus was such a prophet. When he preached his inaugural sermon in his hometown Nazareth, he started by quoting the same prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me  
Because he has appointed me  
To preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the  
acceptable year of the Lord.

The hometown crowd loved what they heard, especially when Jesus said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." They sang to themselves, "Happy days are here again!"

Then Jesus began to *interpret* the text, and the mood began to shift. Jesus said:

- There were many widows in the time of Elijah, and Elijah was sent not to them, but to a widow in the land of Sidon (a foreign land).

- There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; none of them was healed, but only Naaman the Syrian (an enemy general).

The synagogue was filled with rage, and they hauled him out of the city and led him to the brow of the hill to throw him off. Miraculously, he passed through them and went away.

He went away to preach the nearness of the kingdom of God – which was greeted with joy by some and with anger in others.

What was it about, his sermon which raised such wrath? He described a kingdom coming in power and healing to the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed -- which knew no racial, religious, moral or national boundaries!

We are called to offer such a kingdom today. In a world of *misogyny* we respect women and girls. In a world of *xenophobia*, the fear of the stranger, the immigrant, of those who are different, we create a world of *philadelphia*, sisterly and brotherly love. In a world of *racism*, we acknowledge the brutal legacy of black slavery and cross boundaries to befriend those of other races. In a world gone mad with power, we stand for the “might of right,” not the “right of might.”

Jesus the prophet said that at the final judgment, both individuals and nations will be judged by how we treat (note the particularity) the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger (immigrant), the naked, the sick, the prisoner. This is what a great nation does, care for the weakest and most vulnerable among us. Can we be such a people?

We are called to speak and to live such a word in season and out of season, when things look good and when things look not so good. There is a rabbinic version of the story

of Jonah. Jonah had been called to preach repentance and salvation to evil Nineveh. (God loved them too.) He preached in every street of the city, but they did not repent. He preached week after week, month after month, and still, they did not repent. He became a laughingstock of the city.

One day, a young boy came up to him and asked, "Why do you keep preaching day after day, week after week? Do you still hope to change Nineveh?" Jonah replied, "At first I preached to change them. Now I preach so Nineveh will not change me."

So we are called in good times and bad to be a prophetic community calling the nation to its best self. And we will keep on trusting that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. We will keep on until, to use again the words of Isaiah, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."