

The bulk of the Old Testament is made up of the writings of prophets—indeed eighteen of the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Bible are prophetic writings. Ken just read from one of the most prolific of the prophets—Isaiah—who lived in the year that King Uzziah died, 740 BCE. Isaiah was a prophet in the Southern Kingdom of the Jews—known as Judah—home of the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

My Old Testament professor in seminary described prophets as people with one foot in the world of daily life and one foot in the world of the Kingdom of God. They straddle these two worlds, offering guidance and correction, interpreting the law and attempting to lead the Israelite people back to God. The prophets critique the corruption and greed of the government and remind people that their allegiance must be to God and God alone. The prophets defend the rights of aliens, foreigners, widows, and children—those most likely left behind when leaders become blinded by their own power and ambition. More often than not in the Old Testament, the leaders of the people forgot that they were meant to serve and protect. Innocent people were used as pawns in power grabs and taxed beyond their ability to pay. It was obvious that leaders didn't use those taxes to help people in need, they used them to pad their own pockets—pockets that were already full to bursting with the profits of malfeasance and exploitation. God intervened in these messes created by unfaithful people and corrupt leaders by using prophets to speak difficult truths to people who were often reluctant to listen to them.

The prophetic tradition of the ancient Jews is long and rich; much of their wisdom still applies to us today. And, the topic of the prophetic tradition fits into our month of considering the meaning of transfiguration—making something more beautiful or spiritual—because the prophets were called to be agents of transfiguration in their communities.

The Bible offers stories of various prophets, these narratives are spread out across the thousands of years and myriad spaces of scripture. Prophets each had their own style—Hosea was harsh, calling Israel a whore; Isaiah was poetic, talking about the day when swords would be beaten into plowshares and there would be war no more. They used different tactics and rhetorical approaches to communicate their message to the particular group of people to whom they were speaking. But, what they all had in common was their willingness to listen to God. Moses listened to God in the burning bush. Jeremiah listened to God though he was “just a boy.” And Isaiah, when God asked Isaiah, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” Isaiah heard God's questions, listened to God's call on his life, and he responded with one of the most assertive and faithful statements in all of scripture, “Here am I. Send me!”

But, what if the prophets hadn't listened to God? What if Isaiah hadn't been listening to God? What if Isaiah had rejected God's call on his life? Well, if he hadn't listened, chances are he would have ended up like the man Obanemehdabiah. This is his story.

In the year before King Uzziah died, I thought I saw something a little out of the ordinary, up in the sky above the tops of the oak trees, but I was in a hurry and didn't have time to really stop and look at it. There were places I needed to go and people I needed to see.

As I was hurrying along, I heard something that sounded a little like music but I couldn't really hear it because the cacophony of my own thoughts rushing around in my head drowned out the melodies and harmonies. There's a lot going on in my life. I am a very busy person.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, there was a small flock of what appeared to be birds—but it was so weird because it looked like they had six wings or something. I've been so stressed out lately that I must have been seeing double, well, triple.

Then, one of those bird things came swooping down from a tree and nearly ran right into my face. It was all kind of a blur but I think it was carrying a hot coal. I did everything I could to avoid it.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “Get away from me, you crazy thing. Leave me alone. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Not me. Maybe ask Jeremiah. He lives in the village just south of here.”

We only know the names of the people who listened to God and heeded God’s call on their lives—Isaiah, Moses, Ezekiel, Daniel, Malachi, Jeremiah . . . the list of prophets goes on and on. These are the people who listened and responded to God, “Here I am. Send me!” But, I can’t help but imagine that there were, and still are, folks who don’t listen . . . folks like our fictional Obanehmehdabiah—folks whose names we will never know—folks who sensed the presence of something different, and yet didn’t pause in the midst of the busyness to really look or listen.

I am sometimes one of those people—I get wrapped up in the expectations of other people, comfortable in the status quo, and self-absorbed. I stop listening to God. My priorities get mixed up and the next thing I know, I’ve gone a couple of days without praying to listen. I’m a whiz at praying through our Prayer List and answering requests for prayer that show up on my Facebook feed—I do that multiple times a day. But there is a different kind of prayer—a listening prayer—a prayer in which we cease and desist with our petitions and requests and instead create conditions in which to really listen to God. To that end, this kind of prayer transfigures—it makes more beautiful and spiritual my own life and the lives of others.

This is the deep listening prayer of the prophets . . . the listening that yearns to fill itself with the voice of God. It is a listening that comes from setting aside time for silence, a listening that comes from leaving open spaces in our schedules to just be, a listening that comes from knowing that the God of the prophets is still speaking into the messes of our world asking us, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

COMMUNION

God of the prophets in all times and all places, God of the infinite and infinitesimal, in the blazing splendor of your glory you called forth light from darkness, day from night, land from oceans, and life in all its dazzling array from lifeless matter. Among the living you made and called humankind imprinting upon us your image, to be bearers of your glory in the world.

Though we failed to shine, and hid your image within us, you continued to call us into fellowship with you and to fulfill your mission for us through prophets, scriptures, priests, and a people you redeemed for yourself.

And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God almighty, Heaven and earth are full of your glory, glory be to you, O God. Blessed is the one who comes, who comes in the name of God. Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest.

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ. In Christ we see the fullness of your glory revealed in human form.

Born into poverty, he fulfilled his mother's song, that you would fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich empty away.

Declaring the nearness of your kingdom, he forgave sinners, cast out demons, raised the dead, restored the blind and lame, visited the sick, the prisoners and the needy, and gathered disciples to continue to declare the good news in word and deed, transfiguring the world in the power of your Holy Spirit.

By the baptism of his suffering, death and resurrection you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.

On the night in which he gave himself up for us he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

When he supper was over, he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine.

Make them to be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

By your Spirit, make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

Through your Son Jesus Christ, With the Holy Spirit in your holy church, All honor and glory is yours, almighty God, Now and forever. Amen.