

As God Would Have It -- Epiphany 5A

“Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet and announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.” The prophet Isaiah witnesses what he has heard God saying: “Day after day they call on me, wanting to know my ways, as if they practiced righteousness, as if they did not forsake the laws of nature...” ‘As if,’ familiar to us as mocking, sardonic humor. For they were not a nation that practiced righteousness. And they did very much forsake the ordinances of God, and disdained natural law.

The funny thing about prophets is their absolute confidence that their speech is a direct repetition of God’s speech, their voices integral to the discovery of God. Even when God says to humanity, “My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are my ways your ways,” the prophets are acknowledged as having been above and beyond this distinction. Our tradition has it that the words of the prophets whose testimony is recorded in the Bible were true representatives of God. However confusing, conflicted or complex their ideas may be, those ideas have been collected and included because they give us insight into the mind of God. During the liturgy of Ordination, the subject must openly declare such a belief.

Of course what we believe about why God has expressed the ideas in question is a boundless field of

inquiry. And these prophets were long gone, even when Jesus was talking about them. Today, when somebody tells us the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls, the people in power dismiss such claims. But while it's true that only time will tell, it is also undeniable that, because of scientific discovery, time is moving faster than ever. What is most alarming is that our interest in prophecy has not increased along with our scientific discoveries. On the contrary, it seems the more we discover, the less inquisitive we are about the spiritual implications, the cosmic consequences of our so-called advancements.

The likelihood that the world just stopped producing prophets two thousand years ago is pretty slim. Our traditions have us read the biblical prophets and try to make sense of them and they have plenty to teach us about today's issues. But we would do well to keep our eyes and ears open for new input. And if the past is any guide, the most valuable perspectives are those of the marginalized, the downtrodden, the queer and the poor; the kind of people who write on subway walls and tenement halls. Last week we heard the Beatitudes from Matthew's chronicle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount; this is exactly what he was recommending.

Anyone who has taken the opportunity to read work by the renowned biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan will have experienced a thorough shuffling and reframing of traditional understandings regarding the

prophets and how their words represent God. Combined with a deeply convicted and passionate devotion to the phenomenon of Jesus, his tireless and thorough insistence on only entertaining ideas that make good sense gives his listeners a chance to explore the Bible in the company of a thoroughly trustworthy, vibrantly insightful and diligently thoughtful teacher.

One of Crossan's favorite topics is violence. He lays out an argument for considering the Bible as a fully integrated group of texts, whose internal conflicts are not at all those of the inconsistent, even schizophrenic God one might perceive in the Bible. According to Crossan, any conflicts we detect in the biblical representation of God are the result of culture- and instinct-driven misrepresentations of God by us human beings. It is not God who is violent, it is we who try to claim godly justification for our own violence in its many forms.

"When I call, answer me, O God of justice," pleads the psalmist. "What can bring us happiness," people say. "Make justice your sacrifice and trust in the Lord," is the response. Two words around which our thoughts about God swirl: 'justice' and 'sacrifice.' In both cases, our confusion about God leads to violence. For a conception of God that makes sense, justice means "sacrificing" our right to deal violently with one another, sacrificing whatever it is we want and do that gets in the way of justice, giving everyone a fair shake. This is distributive justice. But time and again, the view of God we interpret

from the Bible helps us toward retributive justice in the form of punishment and violence, which the powerful get to decide how to administer. But Godself is neither confusing nor volatile, rather it is we who represent God as such to avoid responsibility for our own volatility and fear-based violence. And it is important that we understand the parameters: economic, political, environmental, and social violence are all just as wrong as the physical kind.

The words of Isaiah in today's lesson are on the Dr. Jekyll side of this equation; the threats and stories of violence stemming from God that we hear in other places throughout the Bible are the work of Mr. Hyde. But the dichotomy is a uniquely human phenomenon. Blaming it on God is a copout. When Isaiah mockingly imitates Israel saying: "Why do we fast, but you do not see us, God? We humble ourselves, but you do not notice," his tone may be unpleasant, but his message is solid. God is saying something along the lines of: 'Look, Pal, whom are you trying to kid? You serve your own interests by your false righteousness, just so you can rationalize oppressing the powerless the rest of the time. You declare good intentions, only in an effort to gain others' complacency, then you strike with a wicked fist. (What we used to call a sucker-punch.) Such declarations as you make today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the kind of lie I will fall for? (uh uh) Is it the way you bow down the head like a bulrush, and lie in sackcloth and ashes? (no) Do you think these shows of yours are pleasing? (Not up in

here) The only gesture I want to see is this: loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, and let the oppressed go free. Share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house. When you see the naked, cover them, and don't hide yourself behind great walls so that your sisters and brothers can't ask you for help or shelter or solace.'

Through the mouthpiece of Isaiah, God concludes: "But if you do what I tell you, then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly. Your vindicator shall go before you. The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. You shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say, "Here I am."

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets," declares Jesus. "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." He is talking about Isaiah's witness to the Word of God. "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." These truths – self-evident as they are – they are not going away, ever. These are the laws of Nature. "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven," etc., etc., and on he goes.

Jesus insists that we take ownership of our wealth, our power, our intelligence, our creativity, and put it to

these very uses: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven.

Our habits of violence and hypocrisy are revealed through these texts, along with the ways we try to blame our Creator for them. Crossan’s unified vision of God is a great comfort – something we can believe in and follow, if only we will, rather than trying to kid ourselves that we’re fooling anybody but ourselves. What they are trying to teach us is that though we may learn to travel fast enough to beat the sun and overtake tomorrow, we will never achieve equality through avarice, nor peace through oppression. In the big picture, the only way to God is through good.

But of course it sets the bar higher for us mere mortals. If there are no real curses from God but only opportunities, we are left to our own choices. Only if we truly make justice the subject of our sacrifices, removing yokes, ceasing to point fingers and to destroy our habitat, offering food to the hungry and using our science to address the needs of the afflicted shall our light rise in the darkness and our gloom become as the noonday. Then will the Lord will guide us continually, be with us in our times of need, and make our bones strong and our prophets idle.

