

Sermon October 6 2024 – The Prophetess and Her Children

Signs of Judgement and Hope

Text: Selections from Isaiah 7 & 8

Good morning. One of the joys of this prophet's series that we've been having these last weeks is that we've been able to sing hymns with prophetic themes that are based on scripture texts from the prophets. Did you notice, for example, that the third verse of our hymn of preparation today included a reference to a memorable line from the Prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 11:6, the prophet speaks of a coming day when an ideal ruler would arise among the people of Judah to make things right and bring world-wide peace, a peace so expansive that it would extend to all creation so that "[t]he wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and *a little child shall lead them.*" Preparing this sermon, I was struck by Isaiah's reference to the little child here as it made me think there was a bit of a pattern in Isaiah's early prophecies where he refers to children as concrete signs of hope for God's good future. On one level, this shouldn't surprise us as children just are concrete, visible, embodiments of newness and life and possibility – this has become especially evident for Nicole and Holden with the arrival of little Charlotte and I'm sure it's become so evident for Charlotte's Grandma, Grandpa, and Uncle and Aunt. While we all might recognize why Isaiah spoke of children as visible signs of God's newness and life, what I suspect might be more surprising to us, is that Isaiah might have been motivated to do so because he had children of his own that he believed were, in their own way, signs of hope to his people in his own time.

Are we surprised, I wonder, to learn that Isaiah had children? At our book study group gathering this week, it was remarked that often we have an image of a prophet as a solitary, lonely, perhaps unattached person existing at the fringes of society and not what we might exactly think of as a "family man." But Isaiah, it turns out, is unique in this way, as we learn

quite early on that he did have children – possibly three of them. To learn about them and how Isaiah thought about them as signs to the world, we must begin by introducing our Prophet for today and it is not, note you, Isaiah. Introducing today’s prophet is a bit difficult because she is left unnamed. The only description given for her, in fact, is that she was a woman-prophet with whom Isaiah bore a child (Isa. 8:3). Was she Isaiah’s spouse? This is quite possible, but the text doesn’t tell us, all we know is that she was a woman-prophet. Quite different, however, from Isaiah, for whom we have long, written accounts of his prophecies, we don’t have any writings of this woman-prophet available. As womanist biblical scholar Wilda Gafney points out, “[t]he only action attributed to the anonymous prophet is the conception of a child with Isaiah who was named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, which means ‘swiftly savaged and rapidly ravaged.’”¹ Somehow, I don’t think this name is going to rise to the top of best baby names of 2024.

This name might be a head scratcher for us on numerous levels. Given what was noted at the outset—that children are embodiments of newness, life, and possibility—we might wonder why on earth someone would name a child this way. We might also wonder, is this the only child conceived by this prophetess with Isaiah? And if not, here’s hoping they expanded their name options! Well, we know from earlier in chapter 7 of Isaiah that sometime prior to little Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz’s arrival, Isaiah had at least one other child, a child named Shear-jashub. Thankfully this name does have a bit more of a positive meaning to it: “a remnant shall return,” is what it means. While the text is not clear, it is likely that this child was also borne of this unnamed prophetess, and perhaps this was the eldest child. And finally, there is another child mentioned in chapter 7 not long after Shear-jashub, a child already growing in the womb of a young woman and that young woman had given this child a name, a name that we will be very

¹ Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam*, 103-104.

familiar with: Immanuel, which means, “God with us.” Centuries later, when Jesus was born of Mary, Christians would look back to this text to say that the full meaning of the name Immanuel had come with the birth of Jesus, God in flesh.

While there are so many blanks left to fill into the story of this anonymous woman-prophet, there is a good chance that she is the young woman – the mother of Immanuel, and so that all three of these children, Shear-jashub, Immanuel, and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, are hers. Remarkably, Isaiah says later that the children that God had given him are “signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts” (Isa. 8:18). The prophetess and Isaiah were, it seems, a kind of prophetic team, that saw their children as standing before the world as signs of hope, and note, also portents or warnings, for the future. As we very briefly heard in our readers theatre, each child, along with their names, had a specific meaning for a particular situation. To explore those particular situations, I invite you to join me on an imaginative experiment for a moment – we have to travel back in time in our minds.

Picture, will you, Isaiah and his eldest son, Shear-jashub, leaving their home in Judah one day. They wave goodbye to the prophetess and head out. Shear-jashub, whose name, remember, means “a remnant shall return,” tags along with Isaiah as he walks up to the palace of King Ahaz of Judah. Isaiah has been summoned to consult with King Ahaz about the complicated geopolitical matters that were pressing at that time. I imagine little Shear-jashub holding Isaiah’s hand, walking into the King’s strategy room. He then sits in a corner, playing with a toy or the ancient equivalent of Pokémon cards. As he plays, he overhears King Ahaz tell Isaiah how Pekah, king of Israel in the North, has made an alliance with the King of Aram to try to fight back the Assyrian army that was threatening them. Ahaz, distraught, then delivers the disquieting news to Isaiah that both Kings in the North were now beginning to attack the communities

surrounding Judah and threatening to invade unless Ahaz would join their fight against Assyria. This is shaping up to be quite a “take your kid to work” experience for little Shear-jashub who can’t help but listen in to this tense conversation even if he doesn’t understand everything that’s going on.

I imagine at one point Ahaz clues into the presence of this little one and says ignorantly, “who is this?” Isaiah then responds, oh, this is my son, his name is “A remnant shall return.” King Ahaz barely registers this name, or what it might signify about a future disaster that would befall Judah as well as a future hope that God would nonetheless bring back people to the land ensuring their survival. Ahaz can’t see beyond his fear and desperation. Poor Isaiah and little Shear-jashub watch King Ahaz pace around the room ranting for what feels like hours. They listen to him as he begins to scheme a different plan – to side with *the Assyrians* against the Kings of Israel and Aram to guarantee Judah’s safety, no matter the cost. Isaiah tries to quell the fears that are driving Ahaz’s madness and so he prophesies that Ahaz need not do anything – that God would protect Judah. Ahaz doesn’t buy it, so Isaiah says, “how can I convince you? How about this, ask for a sign from God – a sign to prove that Judah will be spared from destruction by these Northern troublemakers. Ahaz who has already been testing God’s patience by refusing to listen to God’s prophet, ironically says that he dares not test the LORD by asking for a sign, but Isaiah insists that a sign will be given, nonetheless.

At that moment, there is a knock at the door. The prophetess, herself frequently called upon to provide advice to the King, has been wondering why Isaiah and her son have been gone so long and she comes to investigate. As she walks in, it is clear that she is with child. Isaiah turns to Ahaz and says, here is your sign: this young woman is with child. “And, what, dear prophet-woman,” says Isaiah, “are you going to name the child?” She responds, “Immanuel –

God is with us.” Ahaz should get the point by now. Don’t approach this conflict with the usual assumptions that might and power makes right – trust that God will be with us in this situation. But Ahaz doesn’t get the point. He is captive to an imagination where striking decisively against your enemies is the only way to secure protection for your people, even if it means abandoning your closest held convictions. Shaking their heads, the prophetic couple, along with little Shear-jashub and Immanuel in the womb, exit the King’s strategy room and return home.

Fast forward a couple of years later. On the geopolitical scheme, King Ahaz’s alliance with Assyria has paid off in the short term – the Kings of Israel and Aram to the North are no longer a bother to the King of Judah because Assyria has pushed them to the brink of destruction and this makes Ahaz feel justified in ignoring Isaiah’s warnings and the signs—his children—that were shown to him. By now the King, drunk on the power of his own apparent success in allying himself with strong Assyria, hardly turns an ear to Isaiah anymore. Isaiah and the Prophetess are now expecting their third child soon, and the LORD speaks to him saying, “name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz” – Spoil Swiftly, Ravage Rapidly.” Isaiah and the Prophetess obey this command, and when the child is born, the Prophet family pays a visit to two priests– Uriah and Zechariah- to witness a prophetic naming ritual for their 3rd son. They write his name down on parchment like a title for what was to follow on the rest of the parchment – Isaiah’s dire warning about the future for Judah: trusting in powerful foreign military and abandoning the ways of justice and righteousness, will bring destruction upon the Northern Kingdom of Israel and eventually the Southern Kingdom of Judah too – what was assumed to be an advantageous alliance with a foreign power, Assyria, Isaiah says will ultimately result in the spoils and ravages of war brought upon both Israel and Judah.

And so, as we come to the end of our little imaginative exercise, we are left with the image of Isaiah, the prophetess, and their three children as signs and portents – signs of hope for those whose trust is not in weapons of war but in the God who saves and rescues and portents of judgment for those who believe that destroying your enemy is the only way to achieve peace. Now we are left with the question: what are *we* to make of this strange episode in the text of the prophet Isaiah which describes this prophetic family—Isaiah, the Prophetess, and their symbolically named children? While there may be no simple one to one lesson that we can derive from this strange story, I think there are some connecting points to our own modern experience of faith and discipleship that are worth exploring.

First, it is worthwhile to consider how, just as in Isaiah’s time, we too live in the drama of nations and their leaders that engage in the business of politics and the bloody aspirations of nations. Often, these leaders become dull to the voices of those who critique them and who call them to consider alternatives to the warring ways of nations. In this respect, there is not really that much at all that separates us from the biblical story – it is our story too, despite the very different context. Second, thinking of Isaiah, the prophetess, and their children as signs and portents used by God to challenge those in power and imagine a different way, we might *consider ourselves similarly* to be such signs. We may not all bear prophetic names like “A Remnant Shall Return” and “Spoil Swiftly, Ravage Rapidly” (of that I’m sure we are grateful), but as disciples of Jesus, as Christians, we do nonetheless bear a prophetic name – the name of him who we profess is our salvation and who is Immanuel, God with us yesterday, today, and tomorrow. As bearers and proclaimers of this name, we are not asked to leave prophecies like Isaiah’s to the past, but rather are empowered to be prophetic signs of judgment and hope in our world today too. Perhaps, as we wonder what this looks like practically, we can consider how the

prophetic family we looked at today found creative, performative ways to be these signs in their own day to day lives. As you consider your own day to day lives, take time to ask God, “how can I be a living sign of your hope?” and be ready to consider the simplest of ways God might invite you to be that sign of hope.

Finally, as I draw this reflection to a close, I would be remiss if I did not mention how our story for today asks us to consider the incredible importance of children in God’s kingdom. I wonder if one other lesson we can draw from the prophetic children in our scripture for today is that in our world today, so many children (and of course often their mothers, too) are overlooked and lost due to the choices of leaders who suppose national security and freedom require their sacrifice. In such a world, we might be tempted to work even harder to keep our children to ourselves and shelter them all the more from the world. But, paying attention to them and their wisdom, we must remember that our children are, in their own way, signs of God’s judgment and hope for the world. We and the nations we belong to overlook children and shut our ears to their voices at our peril as they right now call out to us with the voice of God showing us the reality of new creation and imaginative possibilities for the future precisely where we’ve become jaded into believing in the inevitability of life as usual. Let us not forget, after all, that like Isaiah said, after the old world of spoil and waste dies away, God will be with those whose hope has been in the LORD, and a little child shall lead them in the new creation. May it be so. AMEN.

Communion

This morning as we’ve considered the significance of some *names* in scripture and the signs that such names represent, it is significant to participate in the ritual of communion that connects us to a global body of Christians who are known by many different names. Our

denominational bodies and church histories rightly help us to consider how our particular way of being Christian can help us be a gift to the wider church. And yet, sometimes our focus can become too insular, and we can begin to think that our small contributions to the body of Christ represent the whole. And what we miss with such a view is that the worldwide church is called to unity and fellowship together so that we don't miss the signs of hope and portents of judgment from beyond us that can sustain us as one body.

As we consider how we are connected to a much wider body of Christians known by many different names, we are drawn into the task the Apostle Paul describes as “discerning the body” (1 Cor. 11:29). In 1 Corinthians, Paul describes this task in relation to the communion ritual. To discern the body is to know the body – to know the names of its many parts and the value each part holds. Discerning the body is knowing when a part is in pain or broken, when it is injured or in need hurting. It is also to know the gifts a part offers to the whole and rejoicing in those gifts. Discerning the body means learning to hold both the beauty and the pain of the whole body together through Christ's sustaining Spirit. This morning we practice this task of discerning the body by recognizing that we gather on world communion Sunday, and that while we gather in Bloomingdale, Ontario, Canada in a Mennonite Church, we are nonetheless connected to Christians all over the world: in Palestine, in Israel, in Lebanon, in Iran, in Russia and Ukraine, in Africa, in South and Central America, and the list of course could go on. When we mention the names of these countries where our siblings in Christ live, we should remember that many of the Christians who worship there may have names that sound strange or different from our own, but that nonetheless they share in the name of Jesus, in whose name we gather this morning.

Indeed, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, when he took the bread, blessed it, and broke it saying, “This is my body” [Break bread] and when he took the cup [pour juice], and

gave thanks for it, he did so having prayed: Father, I pray that they may be one as you and I are one.” As we partake of the bread and cup this morning, let us be mindful of the world-wide fellowship of Christ’s body. At this time, I would invite the ushers to come forward to prepare the elements. In just a moment we will all have an opportunity to come to the front to be given bread or gluten free crackers and juice. There will be grapes for children as well. We will take the elements in recognition that the body of Jesus is the bread of life that connects us to the lives of believers all over the world and that the cup is the cup of salvation in which we share with fellow believers around the world. All are welcome to this table of the LORD, where God’s goodness can be tasted and seen. So, come – come to the table whose feast extends across the globe – come to the table of God’s world-wide fellowship.