

Sermon – 4th Pentecost
Isaiah 61:1-9 & Luke 4:16-21
June 17, 2018

“The Book that is a Library – The Prophetic Writings Section”

I have a friend, Dale Solberg (a native North Dakotan) and a librarian. I always thought of librarians as folks who liked to read books and tell people to be quiet! Dale was research librarian at a Christian college in St. Paul, but that fact did nothing to change my perception that librarians simply helped people find books, understood labyrinthine card catalog systems and put back books a patron had asked them to find but was too lazy to return to the shelves themselves. Then a while back Dale said he was moving to Alaska to help a Christian college get accredited.

He explained that a college library had to meet stringent requirements before the college could earn accreditation. So I did a little research, and lo and behold found out there is an accreditation manual for college libraries. An institution of higher learning must provide *“library and information resources necessary to fulfill the institution’s mission and objectives which support the academic and research programs and intellectual development of students, faculty and staff.”* That’s standard IER9 (a) by the way.

I noted with particular interest however the phrase; *“fulfill the institution’s mission* – because those four words are perfect to describe why the Bible – *‘the book that is a library’* has a prophetic writings section. The prophets are of major importance, they complete the story of Israel and nearly escort us to the time of Christ, but rare is the sermon based on them and rarer still a small group bible study written for Obadiah or Habakkuk! To put it succinctly the message of the prophets was *“Israel – fulfill your mission.”*

To the Jewish people the prophets were of somewhat secondary importance - the five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy being of primary importance. The Christian church however always considered the prophetic books as having equal authority because the prophets began their speeches with phrases like *“thus says the Lord”* or *“the word of the Lord came to me.”* A prophet was not simply a preacher who explained or applied an existing text of the bible. God gave messages directly to prophets. In fact “prophet” comes from a Hebrew word *“nabi”* which means “to pour forth.” Prophets “poured out” what God “poured in” to them.

For example, Ezekiel 3:10-11 says *“Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart, and hear with your ears. And go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them and say to them ‘thus says the Lord God’ whether they hear or refuse to hear.”* That was the formula – God put in and the prophet poured out. That passage goes on to say *“the Spirit lifted me up and took me away and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong on me...and I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.”*

The prophets bore a heavy message – Israel had not “*fulfilled its mission.*” To put it succinctly, they had forgotten their history, specifically Mount Sinai - flat-out neglecting their covenant with God through Moses - what we call “the Ten Commandments.” The first and most important commandment – *‘have no other gods besides the Lord who brought out of the land of Egypt and the house of slavery’*” was the first to go by the wayside. The prophets railed against Israel’s accommodation of other gods and, as we discussed a few weeks ago, lots of innovation in how they kept the Sabbath day. After that, as they say “all hell broke loose.”

By the 8th century BC, when the prophets started to speak in Israel, much of the nation and particularly its kings had no idea why they existed other than knowing they needed to keep going to the Jerusalem temple for worship and now and then band together to fend off outside threats from people like the Philistines. God knew what was really inside of them however. In Isaiah 1:14-15 God said “*Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.*” That wasn’t all though. When worship becomes perfunctory, not from the heart that is, other sins seize their opportunity to persuade our hearts. Israel had become corrupt in its business, judicial and social realms too. No segment of Jewish society was spared condemnation - which is why prophets were often not spared either.

“*Thus says the Lord*” was a not an invitation for negotiation. By the 7th century BC, prophets like Hosea would say “*rejoice not, O Israel, exult not like the peoples, for you have played the harlot, forsaking your God...So I am to them like a lion, like a leopard I will lurk beside the way, I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs.*” But...these prophets were also given a word of hope. Isaiah 1:18 says “*come now, let us reason together says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow.*” Jeremiah, called “the prophet of Iron” because of how consistently he spoke a message of repentance to the stony hearts of Israel also said “*Behold the days are coming says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and they shall be my people...for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sins no more.*”

Eventually, God, through the prophet Isaiah would say; “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for prisoners.*” This is no wishful thinking or glass half full optimism - it is exactly what “*the Spirit of the Lord*” wanted Israel to know. Isaiah 61 talks of a future many in Israel would have thought impossible. They had sinned, and through the prophets they now knew it. Shame and despair make the future look foggy at best. God is all about the future though, and God’s love clears the fog away, and gives sinners a future with hope - “*a double portion*” of it Isaiah says.

It’s understandable that we would have a hard time accepting such good news – that a person can start over again with a clean slate in the eyes of God and a promising, fulfilling future that radiates kindness and charity and inner peace. Who would believe such a thing? Would you believe it if someone upon whom “*the Spirit of the Lord*” rested told you? Someone has – that someone is Jesus. And if I heard Jesus right, that future begins today! AMEN