

11/13/2016

“Burning Lips: The Pain of Speaking” - Rev Seth Jones ©

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

Prophets occupy a weird and strange role in the communication of God’s promises to the community of faith. I think it is best to think of prophets as being cultural-spiritual performance artists. Isaiah preaches God’s prophecy in the nude on occasion, because it represents the vulnerability of the human and our choices before God. Jeremiah breaks ceramic jars in front of the people because the jar represents the fragility of Israel’s existence and how tenuous our hold can be on God’s word. Jonah we heard about last week. Daniel stands in furnaces and sleeps with lions to communicate the strength of God in the face of adversity. Hosea marries a prostitute as an example of God’s love for Israel even in the midst of Israel’s idolatry.

Prophets become receivers of the subtle and major changes of the community in which they live. They allow themselves to be subject to the frequencies of the faith life of the people, antennae of spiritual movements just beyond the edge of understanding. Prophets receive those elements into themselves and then make themselves subject also to God, who forms, melts, and transforms the communal changes and movements of faith of the people in the purified crucible of the Prophet. The product of that alchemical process in the person of the Prophet is then delivered to the people as God’s word about the situation and what God intends for God’s people.

This means the Prophet always combines their performance art with speech. The action serves the word, and God’s word alters and transforms future actions. This is why Prophets in Scripture always deny their ability to serve God. Moses says, when God comes to him at the burning bush, and I am paraphrasing here, “*You really need someone else to do this, God. I don’t speak well, people don’t like me, and well, I just don’t want to.*” Jonah denied his prophetic call from God by going as far away as he possibly could, and then only after he had to be in the belly of a great fish for three days, did he fulfill his divine mission. Isaiah says that he is impure, unqualified by his humanness to be a vessel, a crucible, a vehicle for God’s word to the people.

Isaiah’s call from God is quite a powerful vision. Seraphs with wings, angels, smoke all surround him in a holiness Isaiah feels he does not deserve. Isaiah says, “*I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips*” (6:5). The presence of God makes Isaiah aware of everything that keeps him from God. And yet, even so, Isaiah has “seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” Upon being purified by a live charcoal carried by an angel, who touches it to Isaiah’s lips, Isaiah takes on the mantle of being God’s prophet.

I think the Prophets deny their initial call from God because they know that when they speak God’s word to the people, it does not always go well. God knows this as well, so he tells Isaiah to call it out in verse 9, on page \_\_\_\_\_:

*9And he said, ‘Go and say to this people:  
“Keep listening, but do not comprehend;*

*keep looking, but do not understand.”*

*<sup>10</sup> Make the mind of this people dull,  
and stop their ears,  
and shut their eyes,  
so that they may not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and comprehend with their minds,  
and turn and be healed.’*

What does this even mean? Fortunately for the Prophet, it is not the Prophet’s job but the people’s job to provide interpretation. And so we interpret, these words, almost 2700 years later. We won’t comprehend because what we think we hear is what we want to hear. We won’t see because we see what we want to see. Thus, we go deaf and blind to God’s presence and God’s words. But God’s word does what it will whether we hear and understand. Just as the universe burst forth at the words of God, so also we may find ourselves turning to God and becoming healed and whole, even against what we think is our better judgment.

When prophets wander the land and speak, they are always speaking directly to those things we hold closest, those things we most identify with in our community. Prophets, therefore, undercut human power structures all the time. This is why, in Matthew 23, on page \_\_\_\_\_, Jesus says,  
*‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’*

When Isaiah speaks as God’s Prophet, when Jesus speaks as God’s Son, the words of God are always against and seek to take apart the things that stand in the way of God - political positions, governmental structures, empire thinking, hate, the denigration of others.

Imagine being Isaiah. His weakness before God, in his eyes, is unholiness, because he is unholy and surrounded by unholy actions in his community. It could be anything, though. As we saw with Moses, it was, finally a lack of will. With Jonah, it was fear and hate. What is your weakness before God? What is the excuse you use when you feel God’s call upon you?

Here is the question I think Isaiah’s story asks of us: How difficult, how bad, how hard do things in the world have to be in order for us to speak for God’s healing? Speaking God’s words into any situation can hurt. It could lead one right up to the Cross with Jesus, who is the Word become flesh, God’s statement to the world that nothing can or will separate us from the love of God (Rom 8). Speaking God’s words can feel like a hot live charcoal pressed to your lips. The ignited flame of the Spirit within may have us speaking for people we never thought we would, standing with people who deaf and blind to God’s presence, even if they do not understand.

The Prophet speaks to the people most often from the position of pain and suffering. The people may not know they are suffering, or they may be very aware of their suffering. The Prophet though makes him or herself available to the pain, the despair, the suffering. It is only

from here that God's transformative power can work, that the burning ember becomes a light of the Spirit, a light to the world. And so the Prophet becomes sensitive to suffering, becomes a receiver which captures signals of despair and pain. They intentionally participate in what Sebastian Junger calls "the community of sufferers".

The secret for us today, and the profound truth, is that when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to us, which is what happens at our baptism, we become a prophet. Not in the way of Moses or Isaiah or Jonah or Daniel or Hosea, but in our own way, according to the community of which we are part. We need to know, though, that the Spirit is a flame, and when the Spirit moves through us, it is like a hot live charcoal being touched to our lips.

That block of charcoal traverses history from Isaiah all the way through to Jesus and then is breathed to life by Jesus onto the disciples, into the church and therefore into us. Sometimes, the charcoal will set itself outside of us so we can turn and be healed. It may take a few times before we realize we have separated ourselves from that burning charcoal, though. That is why it is no surprise where Peter finds himself after Jesus is arrested. In the Gospel of John, chapter 18, on page \_\_\_\_\_:

*15 Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, <sup>16</sup>but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. <sup>17</sup>The woman said to Peter, 'You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?' He said, 'I am not.' <sup>18</sup>Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing round it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.*

It is in front of a fire of burning charcoal that Peter denies Jesus for the first time. Why? Well maybe it is because the story cannot complete itself if Peter doesn't deny Jesus. Or maybe it is because Peter cannot tolerate the pain of speaking the truth to the power which seeks to destroy God's Living Word. He cannot say "Yes, I am a follower of Jesus." He cannot speak from his suffering and his pain. He cannot join the community of sufferers, whose voices always stand in opposition to human power and in alliance with God's love.

The pain of speaking the truths of the faith can be very difficult. As I asked before, how far do things have to go before we are speaking for God's love and against human power plays in our relationships, in our community, in our nation, in ourselves? Or to ask the question in the way Isaiah asks it, "*How long, O Lord?*" "How long must I speak to a people who cannot hear or see You?" Well, once God has appointed a Prophet, the Prophet is always a Prophet. As long as you live is the answer.

We have come out of a brutal election season. The resolution of that season was a shock for many, a welcome surprise to others. To make things even more difficult, President-Elect Trump won the Electoral College, while Secretary Clinton won the popular vote by almost 400,000 votes. This was decided by less than 50% of the people eligible to vote, which means that most of those who can vote didn't. But it also means that about 50% of the population of America thinks 50% of the population of America is dangerous, misguided and wrong. People

have lost friends in this election. People no longer speak to family members because of this election. It sounds like an environment for God's prophets to step up.

For help in how to follow in the footsteps of Isaiah and Jesus we can follow the live charcoal block that burned Isaiah's lips to one last place. After the Resurrection, Jesus shows up on the shore while the disciples are fishing. He helps them pull up some fish, then, in John 21, on page \_\_\_\_\_:

*9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.'<sup>11</sup> So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.<sup>12</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.'...*

*15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.'<sup>16</sup> A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'<sup>17</sup> He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'*

Even though you and I may stand with Peter at the charcoal fire outside Jesus' trial and deny we know him, we are still invited to the fire of the Spirit. Even though it may burn our lips to speak God's holy word into difficult situations, Jesus sits with us and serves us from the depths of his body and blood and being. We suffer with one another. We feel the pain of failure and defeat, and we feel the burning longing of what it means to be forgotten and left out of the community, and we receive the despair and suffering of those around us. The reason we are able to speak to these things is because we love who Peter loves.

Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves him. Once asked and answered is an agreement between two people; twice asked and answered is a personal promise between close friends; three times asked and answered is a covenant ratified in heaven. We are bound by the love of Christ to one another, no matter who we voted for, no matter what we think of the state of the nation. With Peter, our lips burn with the love of God for one another.

What will it take for us to speak God's burning love to, for, and with each other?

Amen.