

11/19/2017 – “Prophetic Consciousness: Light in Darkness” – Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7

If you recall, I have spoken of Prophets before as people who speak God’s word into a particular situation, and the word the Prophet speaks may also have implications for the future. But, it is important we understand that the job of the Prophet is not what we think of in the modern world. In the modern world, we think prophecy means predicting the future. In the ancient world, a Prophet was responsible for cutting through all the cultural and religious talk, and all the political obfuscation and power-seeking, in such a way that God’s word penetrates deeply into the hearts of the people whom God loves.

Last week, we heard one aspect of the Prophetic Consciousness as Amos proclaimed justice and righteousness. Then, God called out the hypocrisy that was blinding the hearts and minds of God’s people. As we reflect on those words of destruction and desolation from last week, we would do well to reframe the phrase “*God’s judgment*” to something like “*the consequences of not living according to the covenant of God*”. The judgment is a not a result of God directly punishing people, but rather the consequences and trajectory of a life lived outside God’s will.

Such a way of living has future consequences and sometimes the Prophet is projecting those consequences into the future. By looking deeply into what has gone horribly wrong and calling it out in the name of God, the Prophet is consciously reaching into a future that may not yet be visible.

Amos was a hard word to hear last week. It was a ‘convicting word’, as the Baptists call it. That is a good way to receive Amos – a radical, restructuring, deep self-examination about where we have wandered off the path of God’s justice and righteousness.

This week we hear a new aspect of the Prophetic Consciousness in our words from Isaiah. Isaiah presents us with what is underneath all of Amos’ exhortation against the people. Isaiah is writing about 60 years later than Amos. The kingdom is still divided. More than likely, the Jewish people are suffering under the rulership of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were a scary and brutal kingdom. Many of our modern ideas of torture come from the Assyrians. Destroying civilian villages and towns was a common terror tactic for their armies, which they made as huge and terrifying as possible. The people under the power of the Assyrians indeed “*walked in darkness*”.

To these people, and especially the Jewish people, who walk in darkness, they “*have seen a great light...on them light has shined*”. Underneath Prophet Amos’ Prophetic word last week is God’s hope and light, which Isaiah speaks to this week. This is a good rule for when we are reading Scripture: **Whenever darkness is present in the world, and Prophets are calling out the evil in that dark world, this is not because God wishes for darkness upon the world. Prophets call out the darkness and the people who participate in the darkness because God’s hope and light for the world has been dimmed.**

We have to get through the darkness to see the light. We must go through the pain of cracking open the darkness for the light of God to shine upon us.

This is what Isaiah is doing today. In the rubble of the destruction of warfare and slavery, into the memories of a time of thriving and possibility, there the light of God shines upon the people whom God loves.

The people of Israel in the time of Isaiah are living in a deep darkness. It is a place and time of *'fatal hopelessness'*. I used that phrase *'fatal hopelessness'* because it fits the darkness way back in 700 BC, Isaiah's time. The phrase isn't mine, though.

*'Fatal hopelessness'* is what a sheriff said of his county when discussing the heroin/opioid epidemic sweeping the nation. The leading cause of death in the nation for people aged 22-55 is drug overdose and the vast majority of those overdoses are from heroin and opioids. Over 64,000 people died from overdoses in 2016.

Many of you have been prescribed opioids for the pain from a surgery. Some of you may have had the experience of really, really liking those pain-killers. Many of us stop taking them before the addiction takes hold, but many don't, or can't.

Maine is ground zero for the beginnings of the heroin and opioid epidemic in the nation. When I first came to town, I asked the search committee what the drug of choice was for the area because it is good to know what the dark spirits of an area are when you come into the place. I was told primarily heroin because the craggy shoreline allows for easy transport. That was 8 full years ago. Now, it is a nationwide problem.

Very quickly here is the trajectory of how a drug epidemic is created. I am in pain, so I go to my doctor. My doctor prescribes oxycontin or oxycodone, drugs invented in the early 1990s and sold to the world by the pharmaceutical companies because they were non-addictive pain control drugs.

Nothing was further from the truth. These are incredibly addictive drugs.

Now, my prescription runs out, and I can only get a decreased prescription for the drug on which I am now hooked. So I look for another source. Since these drugs are so broadly prescribed, finding someone who has some is very easy. I or my friend might even make money on the side selling the drug.

The drug companies invent even more powerful drugs based on the ones they made before. Now, fentanyl comes onto the market, which is 50 times more powerful than straight up heroin. But the side effect of fentanyl, sometimes, is the collapse of the circulatory system because it is a massive narcotic depressant. So, if I have run out of the drugs prescribed and the supply from friends has dried up, I might turn to street drugs.

The most popular street drug for centuries now has been heroin. You can smoke it, eat it, cook it and inject it. It is a highly functional drug. To make money, cartels and dealers cut heroin with fentanyl to accelerate the high. There are so many people addicted now

to these drugs, the cartels and dealers can suffer a high loss of clientele and still maintain a huge multi-billion-dollar income on the drugs sold. Our use of these drugs as a country is orders of percentages higher than any other nation on earth. For every 5 people who die of a drug overdose in Europe, 150 people die in America.

I know some of you have attended the funeral of someone who has died from an overdose. If you have not, I pray you do not, because there is little that is more heart-breaking. That *'fatal hopelessness'* of the people who live in darkness is contagious. The tendrils spread and reach deeply into communities.

For those who are addicted, often by no action of their own, opioid drugs erase hope. For those who watch someone struggling with the addiction, the pervasiveness of the addiction makes the possibility of recovery seem hopeless. For those who stand around the grave with mourning family and friends, chaos, meaninglessness, and hopelessness wait at the door for their next victim.

The promise of the future is negated by the darkness.

This situation is exactly where Isaiah's Prophetic Consciousness speaks. *"Those who lived in the land of deep darkness, on them light has shined."* When we think of this great light of the love of God, the people of the time would have thought of that light as the diffusing, reaching light of a lantern or a torch, not the directed, bright lights of a flashlight or halogen bulb.

God's light, God's love, softly glows along the ground and brightens from the bottom up. The orange gentle brightness moves slowly and gradually so that people can come into the glow quietly, anonymously, gently, stepping into the soft promises of God's love and hope for God's people.

Shadows here are still long, the memory of the past destructions and horrors still present, but they are cast back in the overcoming light and love of God. When Jesus says in John 8, *"I am the light of the world"*, he means this kind of light, the light of a lantern, the soft, expanding glow of a lit torch. When we begin to follow Jesus, this is the light which now *'enlightens'* us. We become the flame and light of the Lord, and when we are speaking for and from this light, we are entering into the Prophetic Consciousness of Isaiah.

What does this light, this prophetic word of hope, look like?

In verse 3, Isaiah says, *"You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest"*

The Prophetic Consciousness brings joy into the darkness. Isaiah reminds the people it is God who brings growth and wealth to the nations, and the riches of the harvest. This is a source of joy for the people *who live in darkness*.

I think part of what brings a soft, gentle joy to other people is when we see them as just people, when we see a person outside of labels and history and judgments from what she or he has done or hasn't done. Of course, we saw in Amos that Prophetic Consciousness calls out places where the dignity and humanity of the person is not respected, protected and honored.

This doesn't happen to all people all the time, however. Most people are not actively disrespecting and dishonoring other people. Most people participate in systems and institutions that do these things, but they themselves are just trying to get from one day to the next. Perhaps the most joyful act we can bring to another person is to see them as a person deserving of God's light and love shining upon them.

In verse 4, Isaiah says, *“For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken...”*

The Prophetic Consciousness brings the possibility of freedom from oppression and slavery. I take this to mean recognizing that everyone is suffering from something and assuming that is a good way to approach other people. If Jesus is the light of the world, then we become light for others by finding ways to lift burdens from others, to help free them from whatever it is that is oppressing them in their lives.

Rather than thinking big about freeing others, think small. What is the smallest thing I can do for another person that will free them, even if for a few moments, from whatever burdens him or her?

In verse 5, the Prophet Isaiah says, *“For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.”*

Prophetic Consciousness brings the light of peace to others. As a country, the United States has only known 12 years of peace since its inception during the Revolutionary War. We can only conceive of peace as a nation in terms of the end of war. But God's peace is active. God uses the memory of war and destruction as fuel for the fires of peace.

War is always the least best option for solving any problem, and the costs of endless warfare are all-consuming. The biggest toll is on, of course, soldiers, their families, and veterans. If the peace of Christ is not our goal for ourselves and our individual friendships, it should at least be our goal for those who have served and supported those who have served. The reason for this is because war is a first cause of that *‘fatal hopelessness’* we spoke of earlier.

Joy, freedom, and peace – these are the ways we know the soft light of God shining upon us. *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”* Joy, freedom, and peace are the soft, reaching torch of that great light.

There is an important aspect of that great light that speaks to how we deal with the '*fatal hopelessness*' that grips so many right now. Verse 6 says, "*For unto us a child has been born...*" This tells us where the joy, freedom, peace, and hope of the Lord come from. It comes from a person – not from a government, not an institution, not a bureaucracy, or some ruling council.

As Christians, we know this is not just any person, but one person – Jesus Christ, the light of the world. The drug crisis in America today is terrifying, overwhelming, but we know from our readings this week that this is the darkness speaking. If Jesus is the light of the world, Jesus also tells us that, because we follow him, we are carriers of His light, His joy, freedom, and peace, as well.

<sup>14</sup> "*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.*<sup>15</sup>*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.* <sup>16</sup>*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*" (Matthew 5:14-15)

The person sent by God in Isaiah is the Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. There is a lot of authority talk in there. The Assyrian Empire built authority on despair and darkness, slavery and disempowerment, warfare and destruction. This is the way of power and authority on Earth. It is the way of empires old and new.

The authority of the one sent by God is a soft but great light that radiates joy, freedom and peace. Let's read Isaiah today backwards from our commitment to Christ.

We are followers of Jesus Christ, who died upon the Cross and was resurrected for our joy, freedom, and peace of soul and mind. In this recognition, we, by Christ's very words, are the light of the world with him. When we read Isaiah, what if we are '*the great light that has shined upon the people*'?

What if we left here today knowing- not because of anything we are obligated or required to do, but simply by who we identify ourselves with - that we are the Prophetic Awareness of the light of God in the world today?

What if we understand the light that shines to be the soft, reaching light of joy, freedom and peace for all people?

What if we approached the people of this country ravaged by drugs, warfare, and depression as individuals who deserve to have that light always shining upon them?

Because, finally, you and I are just a person, an individual with struggles, fears, pains, compulsions, and needs just like the person who is sitting next to you, the person who is driving behind you, the person who is not getting out of the way at the grocery store, the person who is addicted to heroin, the person who just got back from another tour of duty in the military, the person who can't get up this morning.

*This* is the Prophetic Consciousness which does not shy away from the presence of darkness, like Amos, nor does it shy away from the light of God, like Isaiah. Both aspects of the Prophetic Consciousness are built on the love, hope, and promise of God.

May the light of God's joy, God's freedom, and God's peace be upon each one of us this Thanksgiving week, and may that light reach the people around you also.

*Amen.*