

In the year that king Uzziah died...

Sunday, 18 January, 2015

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-12

One of the first stories I heard after taking up a position in the Reformed Church in America in New York in the early 1970s was of a colleague, in the Midwest division, somewhere in western Michigan or Iowa, who had gained fame for having preached for an hour and a half on just one verse of the Bible. Now, there is nothing inherently strange about that: out in the American Midwest, as in more conservative areas here, sermons are regularly that long: with the Blue Laws, or at least community pressure, not to do other work or engage in 'worldly' entertainment on the Lord's Day, there is little to do between the morning and evening cow milking on Sundays, except to go to church twice and listen to long sermons. And there are certainly Bible verses which are sufficiently pregnant – John 3:16, “for God so loved the world”, or Romans 12:21, “Do not let evil conquer you, but use good to defeat evil” are two, one theological and one practical, that come to mind immediately. One could easily preach on them for a lifetime, much less an hour-and-a-half. But the verse in question was this one: Isaiah 6:1. What could one say about this verse for an hour? How could one get even five minutes out of this statement of fact? OK: who was Isaiah, who was Uzziah, a bit of the history of the times. At the time I heard the story, it amazed me. Over the years I think I have discovered what the brother might have had to say, although I promise you won't take an hour and a half to say it.

“In the year that king Uzziah died...” That would have been somewhere about 742 BC. Uzziah was one of the more successful kings of Judah; his reign was long – 42 years – and peaceful and prosperous – in fact, he was probably one of the most successful kings of Judah, after the division of the Davidic kingdom after Solomon's rule. Now, in the perspective of world history, that was probably 'more luck than good management': it probably had less to do with his own abilities than with luck: he had the good fortune of ruling at a moment when the really big powers to the east and west, the kingdoms of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, and even his local competitor, the northern kingdom of Israel, were in decline or experiencing instability, and therefore Judah was left in peace.

There is this wonderful, poetic contrast here, probably unintentional, but no less wonderful for that, between the timely and the timeless. “In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated upon a throne, and the skirt of his robe filled the temple”.

It is a truism that all things pass. Normally we take that in the sense of the pulpit story about an elderly, self-trained preacher who was asked what he considered the most comforting passage of the Bible, one that had brought the greatest reassurance. He replied that it was one which occurred frequently in the Gospels: “And it came to pass...”: the Bible tells us that things “come to pass”, but never says that they – particularly troubles – came to stay! Now, while his Bible scholarship might be faulted – “come to pass” is an archaic, King James Version translation of “it so happened” – his psychology cannot. “This too will pass” has often offered comfort in times of trial. No trouble or affliction is permanent; each is passing, and most of us have gotten through bad times with such a thought.

But this is a two-edged sword, for the good will also pass. And that is the case here: the good reign of king Uzziah also comes to an end. It is what the Preacher saw in Ecclesiastes: prosperity and calm too pass away, they are no more lasting than evil. The good and the bad, the weak and the powerful, wisdom and foolishness, the wise and the foolish, all are passing: “There is a time for every purpose under heaven.” From the standpoint of eternity, all is emptiness. It is the concept picked up by the British poet Percy Shelley in his poem “Ozymandias”, where he writes,

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read.

And near it too is the ironic inscription:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

It is also the wisdom of your Dutch writer Multatuli, in his trenchant observation "Van de maan af gezien, zijn wij allen even groot." In the long view, our human distinctions are invisible.

And that is precisely the image Isaiah gives us, in the comparison of the passing of Uzziah and the vision of the Lord seated on his throne, "high and exulted": Uzziah's death, and the undying King, creator and sustainer of the world, ruling eternally in majesty and power. This is the King of whom the psalmist wrote (90:2, 4) "From everlasting to everlasting Thou art God, for a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is passed, or as the watch that ends the night." And as the psalmist also said, those who place their trust in princes, and in nations, shall find themselves exposed; those who delight in the strength of a horse [that day's military equivalent of the Stealth Bomber] will find themselves in a panic. This God alone is our Rock, our Fortress, our Strength. I could weary you with Biblical citations on this point – I suspect the Reformed Church brother did – but it couldn't make this any more certain.

The next thing we need to note here is that this God is a God who has chosen to dwell with his people. He is not a God who dwells on a mountain top, who comes down occasionally, like the Greek Gods did, to lust after a woman or a boy, or blast some presumptuous mortal, or like the Hindu gods who are always rushing around in their celestial chariots. He is a God who walked in the Garden, who visited under Abraham's tent flap, who heard the cry of his people in Egypt, who dwelt in the Tent of the Presence, and then reluctantly moved into the temple (as God says to David, "I should be building you a house, not you one for me!"), who spoke to and through the prophets, who ultimately, as we Christians argue, actually took on human flesh and dwelt among us as a mortal, to share our lives. We Christians often think of "God with Us", the Messiah, as uniquely ours: although they have never been able to accept that last and final step we take in developing that idea, nonetheless the concept of a God, the mighty Power of the Universe, who is with his people, living with them, is absolutely shared with the other Abrahamic faiths. This is the eternal but immanent God whom Isaiah encounters, in the year that king Uzziah died.

Now, I am certain that the brother out there in Michigan or Iowa, whichever it was, did not limit himself to just verse 1, or even 1 through 3, but continued with reflections on the following verses, 5 through 7, and perhaps beyond. They are noteworthy in recording is Isaiah's response to this vision. Now, while this was

his calling as a prophet, it was not his first encounter with God; he was there in the temple because he had already felt the call of God to serve as a priest. He has had enough experience of this God to know his place in the order of things – and in the face of such a God he responds, “Woe is me! I am lost...” But this is not merely the awe of being face to face with a might that far exceeds us: it is immediately qualified with a moral dimension: “for I am a man of unclean lips”. It is not merely a differential in power, but a differential in goodness: Isaiah is all too well aware of his own sinfulness. But perhaps even more important is what follows: “and I dwell among a people of unclean lips”.

We are accustomed to thinking of God as the “maker of heaven and earth” in proto-scientific terms, as the Creator of all things: seven day cosmic creation, and separate creation of mankind. There are still plenty of Christians fighting that battle against Lyell and Darwin. But it seems to me that the arguments about evolution and uniformitarianism – the “how” of the creation process – are not particularly important, but rather the assertion that, however the creation was accomplished, it was not a random, accidental process, but rather, a meaningful and purposeful one. And that meaning is ethical, or, if you please, moral. Last month, in my Christmas sermon, I cited Martin Luther King's famous witness, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” When we affirm God as Creator, we affirm God as the creator of that moral arc. Faced with that moral arc, the built-in moral direction of life, we know that we have fallen short: we are, as Calvin famously put it, 'totally depraved': by which he meant not that we are 'totally, totally depraved', but that from our limited perspective on life we do not always have the knowledge to identify what is good – who among us has not had the experience of seriously, carefully weighing some decision, only to discover that, as time goes on, it was not the right course? – and at the same time, even with the best of intentions and foresight, we sometimes lack the sticking-power to carry through our decisions. And together those are often fatal to our best intentions. But there is also our sin, refusing to recognize that there is a moral arc built into life, or worshipping some idol rather than the Creator of that arc – and then becoming as vile and as worthless and as empty as the things – wealth, power, human esteem, violence – that we worship. There is a long record of judgement in scripture on that, from the prophets (Hosea 9:11, Jeremiah 2:4-5, II Kings 17:15) through the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 6:19-21, Luke 12:39), and Paul (Romans 1 :18ff). It is not unlike the law of karma: evil is its own punishment – and particularly what, from my days in New York, I have chosen to label the 'mafia law of karma’: what goes round comes round.

Isaiah, in his encounter with the King of Creation there in the temple affirms that same principle of a moral universe, immediately recognizing our human failing and sin.

But God's response – through agency of an angel – is one of forgiveness. Again, we need not belabour the point that one of the Names of God has always been the All Merciful. One wishes that some of our Muslim brethren might pay attention to the fact that in the Koran, just as prominently as God is affirmed as Great (Allahu Akbar), God is affirmed as All-Merciful (Allahu Rahman) and Most Merciful (Allahu Rahim): every Sura, or chapter, begins with those words. But I am afraid that our Muslim brothers do no better than we Christians at actualizing that point. But that does not detract from the Being of God, whom Isaiah encounters as the Creator and Judge of the world and all its people – that one and same Judge, high and exalted, is (as Calvin called him) the King of Mercy and of Grace. Except for the judgement of our failings, there is no point in mercy. But at the very moment that we acknowledge our failures before God and the moral arc He fashioned, at the moment we with Isaiah utter the words “Woe is to me, I am lost...” we find abundant mercy there, without having to ask for it. What we have here, in Isaiah's encounter, is the essence, the kernel of the Gospel: God is merciful, forgiving, and applies that mercy and forgiveness in our world.

And one final reflection, on verse 11. In a sense, “How long, O Lord?” is the question of my life (and probably yours too). I often find myself muttering it as I wait for a metro and the announcement board has just changed to tell me that the train that was to be there in zero minutes will now be here in nine, or as I wait for a PDF document to download. Quite literally, it is a question of powerlessness. It is particularly however a question of powerlessness in the face of evil and suffering. I believe – we believe, as Christians – that God, a God who in fact shared our human lives with us in Jesus Christ – does know and feel our pain and suffering, the pain and suffering of the world, and wills that it will not prevail: in Christianity that is particularly the message of the resurrection, that violence and suffering and death are not the final realities. Yet it doesn't seem to happen. We wait, and yet it doesn't seem to happen. In fact, as the reply to Isaiah indicates, things are going to get worse before they finally get better. How long, O Lord, how long?

It is a question which we can deal with intellectually, theologically. Yes, God could step in immediately set things right – that's a part of the job description – but out of his regard and respect for man, he allows us to make our own decisions, even though that leads to suffering for us, and for others. In a sense it is a bit like good parenting: if they are ever going to 'grow up' and take responsibility for themselves and their actions, there comes a point where you have to let your child take the consequences of his or her decisions – even if you know that is going to be painful – rather than stepping in and infantilizing them, trying to control their lives. Is that harsh on the part of God to allow the suffering caused by man's misbehaviour to continue, even multiply? Is it harsh on the part of the parent? Is it unloving for a person dealing with an addicted person to allow them to 'bottom out'? Well, it is not called 'tough love' for nothing. It could also be argued that is the most loving position to take. But for a person who hopes, it remains one of the greatest mysteries of faith.

In the meantime, this brings us back around to where we started: the contrast between our own time, and God's eternity. God's time line is simply not ours. We are impatient. We – and not unreasonably – want to see results while we're still around to appreciate and enjoy them. But that is not the way the world – or God – is. Both outlast us. They operate in a different time zone. As we sign on for our calling as Christians, we had best know that we are in it for the long haul, and unlike some happy mortals like Simeon (Luke 2:25ff) at the baby Jesus' presentation at the temple, we will not have the satisfaction of seeing our hopes fulfilled, or seeing justice done, or seeing right triumph. In a sense, Isaiah is fortunate in having that so bluntly stated at the beginning of his ministry; he knows what to expect, what he is getting himself into. So do we now, that Isaiah has shared his experience with us.