

The Most Dangerous Word in the Bible

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In a moment I'm going to tell you all what I believe to be the most dangerous word in the Bible. It's found in the Gospel lesson we've just read from Matthew. No, I'm not going to tell you just yet, but just hold that question in the back of your mind for now.

But first, the news: The nation is in an uproar; the people are divided as they have never been before; there is a new leader who is using fear, misdirection, and chaos to manipulate his political ends. And there is turmoil everywhere.

Oh yes, I should probably mention. The year is 507 BC. And the nation is Israel. Israel is putting itself back together as a culture and a people, after the terrible time as slaves of the Babylonian Empire.

A new leader has taken the helm. He has run on the platform, "Make Israel Great Again," and he is moving to secure the borders and draw up executive orders that, as he says, "Puts Israel First."

And onto the stage of this political chaos steps a poet who calls himself Isaiah, who has, he believes, a word to speak on behalf of God. What he says is what prophets in Israel most always say, in one way or another. The prophet basically says that you, Israel, have forgotten who you really are as God's people.

You've already forgotten that you were once slaves. You were once poor, and outcast, and oppressed; you were once the outsider, the alien immigrant in the land. Remember when you were slaves, how you depended on the goodness of others? Remember "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land"?

What a frightening thing to be an alien in another land, to be cut off from the place you knew as home. But God has delivered you from slavery, as God did before that in Egypt

But now, says Isaiah, you have become the owners of the land. Now, you are the landowners; you are the ones with the money; you are the employers. And already you're acting like those Babylonian overlords, or earlier, like those Egyptian task masters.

2.

You go to church and just enjoy worship, and even fast on festival days. But you're going to church for your own interests, and on Monday, "Oppress your workers."

You turn away the newcomer to the land, the immigrant, the alien, despite what it says right there in the Torah: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:34)

What you've forgotten, says Isaiah to Israel in 507 BC, is that, when you were the outcasts, and the foreigner and the oppressed slaves, God made a covenant with you, a covenant of Love, which called you, for the rest of human history, to live lives of Love and Compassion, and Justice, where ALL human beings are seen as brothers and sisters. You, says Isaiah, were called to live in a Covenant community, in an Economy where all have enough, all take care of one another, because they trust God to provide.

So in today's lesson, Isaiah is not impressed with their comfortable worship, even their fasts. "Look, you serve your own interests on your fast day, and oppress all your workers....Is such a fast that I choose?....No. Rather, "Is not THIS the fast that I choose, says God, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, ...to share your bread with the hungry, bring in the homeless poor into your house...?"

Well, that was 507 BC. I'd say offhand that this is a good week for us to hear this scripture, isn't it? Because it happens in every age. We forget who we are. We forget God's covenant of love for every human soul on the planet, especially those on the bottom: the poor, the persecuted, the oppressed, those foreigners who come in desperation to our shores. And we need to be reminded by prophets.

In every age we forget who we are as God's loving, generous, compassionate people, and in every age, prophets are called to step up to the microphone and critique our culture, and proclaim God's word.

And by the way, this prophecy is not a liberal versus conservative thing; it is not a Republican versus Democrat thing. Five years ago, a nun from a convent in upstate New York was arrested for protesting in the street against the Drone Program of the Obama Administration. She believed that this program killed innocent Palestinian children, and that it did not reflect who we are as God's people.

3.

Several years ago, I knew an acolyte, who in his Middle School locker room saw a fellow student being punched and kicked—abused—by bullies.

But that is what prophets do. They presume to speak for God, critiquing their situation, even their entire culture and reminding them of that Covenant of love. And reminding us that when we act or govern out of fear, then that fear creates new kinds of slavery.

And, as in 507BC, as in Jesus' time, as in our time, there will also be Herods, those leaders who feed off the great fear that the people have, fear that there will not be enough in this economy, fear of those not like us, those outsiders, those whom we eventually begin to see as less than human.

The Herod of Isaiah's time, (we don't know his name), keeps himself in power by saying to the people, "You see, folks, it's those Persians or Babylonians who are responsible for your troubles." Later, Jesus' Herod would say, "You see, folks, it's those Samaritans who are responsible for your troubles."

There have always been Herods who rule by fear of the outsider. The Herod of Germany in the 1930's: "It's those Jews that are responsible for this economic disaster."

And in our own day. "It's those Mexicans swarming over the border, taking your jobs; it's those Chinese, swindling us economically; it's those Muslims, sneaking in among the refugees, that are out to kill us with terrorism in the name of Allah." Then, as now, it is fear that makes us look at outsiders as our enemies. The age-old sin of Xenophobia, Fear of Strangers. It leads us to view those "others" out there as less than human. Which itself is a foundational definition of slavery. And slavery takes many forms.

And so, Dr. Amar Sanjay, a dentist, his wife, his three young children, lived a peaceful life in Syria until their own government set out to destroy his village, out of revenge. Miraculously, that dentist managed to escape the terror with his family, two years—two years in a Refugee Camp, being interviewed and interviewed and interrogated and interrogated by U.S. State Department officials.

Dr. Sanjay of course understands this and accepts this as appropriate. Isis is evil, and the United States has a responsibility to protect its citizens from harm. He accepts what is the most intense, careful vetting that any immigrant has ever had to go through to enter the United States.

And now he is finally, finally, given the green light to go to America. He and his wife and children make the long flight to New York's LaGuardia airport, and he learns that Herod, twelve hours before, has invoked a confusing, three month travel restriction. He knows, as we all know, that it is because he is a Muslim.

4.

And now, it's time for me to tell you what I believe to be the most dangerous word in the Bible. It's in our Gospel lesson, and it is said by Jesus. It is the word YOU. "You are the light of the world."

Notice that Jesus does not say that I, Jesus, am the light of the world. The Bible says that in other places—John says that. But here, in this Gospel of Matthew, that we read this morning, Jesus says YOU.

You and me. We are the light of the world. We are the ones called to be a light in the darkness of Fear, of prejudice, of bigotry, of abuse, of anything that sees the other person as less than human.

You, You are the light of the world. You and I are called to pray, and listen, and discern, and critique what's going on in our world, whether it's the Bully in the Middle School Locker Room, or a local referendum that harms the homeless, or Herod's latest presidential decree. You are called to find some way to say, NO. NO. I WILL NOT STAND FOR THIS.

I will not stand by silently and quietly as my brother or sister is being put down, detained, abused, robbed of their dignity as a human being. I will do whatever it takes: the letter to the editor, the phone call to the congressman, the speaking up in the public forum, even marching in the streets. As a member of this Body of Christ, as a light in the darkness, as a compassionate human being in this world, I will not stand for this.

And yes, I realize that there is a cost. Jerusalem stones the prophets, and they have gotten good at it. The Nunn in Maryland is arrested, and ejected from her Holy Order. The Acolyte is punched in the nose.

And in our day, to critique our nation is to be labeled "Unpatriotic" at least, even though critique is at the heart of our freedom. Our final hymn this morning, "America the Beautiful" contains verse 2, "America, America, God mend thine every flaw; confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty in law."

So, to YOU. You prophets, be strong and of good courage. And remember what God's word is in most every case, "Fear Not. For I am with you."

And then, remember the rest of Isaiah's proclamation given to us this morning. If we try as best we can to be the light of the world, with PRAYER, and HUMILITY, and COURAGE, then, as the poet puts it, *Your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; Your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall call for help, and the Lord will say, "Here I am."* Amen.