

## ***A Prophet's Vision of God***

*A Sunday Morning Message on January 11, 2026*

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Last week was a rough week. A very rough week. The news on the national level has been shocking and horrifying punctuated early on by physical and verbal threats against other countries formerly our allies. Then the unimaginable happened when a 37 year old mother was gunned down by ICE agents in her own neighborhood. In that instant something fundamental died in all our souls as we were confronted by the undeniable reality that a good chunk of our federal government has become profoundly broken. Despite undeniable video evidence provided by multiple sources, top leaders of the current administration in Washington insisted on blaming the victim. Not surprisingly, protests have erupted across the country. So much so that it feels like we are living in a powder keg and we're not sure who has the match nor how long the fuse actually is.

The question for us right now then, in this moment, is what are we supposed to do? What is there to do, really? I know some of us participated in protests locally and maybe even sent money to the GoFundMe page for the victim Renee Nicole Good. That's already shut down, by the way. Her family felt it had more than achieved the original fundraising goal so they shut her page down and asked people still wanting to donate on behalf of Renee to do it through their own local human service agencies. Wow. So, if you haven't done anything else yet in response to this tragedy you can still do that. Or support the candidates for office at every level, local, state and national, whom you feel will work hard to see that this kind of outrageousness stops.

Let's admit it, though – we're in church after all – there are in fact lots of things any of us can be doing, probably should be doing, but we haven't yet. Perhaps we secretly feel it won't make a difference so why bother. Perhaps we still have loved ones who don't see what happened as a problem and we don't want to upset them. Others of us have been praying, fervently for God's direct intervention to stop the madness. Never a bad option, prayer, especially when situations are so very grievous as this clearly is. Still others are just numb, unable to process that this is really happening here. In the United States of America. But it is, and like it or not, we have to deal with it. Unpleasant and frightening as it is, pretending everything is "just fine" isn't a

real answer. Not this time. That in itself is terrifying to acknowledge. But it's where we are.

And guess what. This is exactly the kind of situation the prophets of the Old Testament found themselves in all the time. Every single one of them were given the job of confronting leaders – both religious and secular – who were not doing the right thing by the people they were charged with governing. That's what prophets do. According to Wikipedia, a prophet is “an individual ... in direct contact with a divine being ... [who] speaks on behalf of [that] being ... serving as an intermediary” between God and the people.<sup>1</sup> In other words, a prophet – especially when it comes to prophets in the Bible – is someone who tells the people what God thinks the people should be doing which is often in sharp contrast with what they are actually doing. Prophecies could be to the people as a whole or their leadership, like a king or perhaps even a high priest, although the latter were usually not too keen about prophets.

Unfortunately, in our particular UCC tradition, we do not usually spend a lot of time thinking about or studying the prophets of the Old Testament. We know they're there in the Bible, of course. We've seen their books listed in the Table of Contents for the Old Testament. We've even heard a few sermons preached on certain well known stories coming out of the prophets. This is especially true during Advent when we give the prophets – especially Isaiah and Jeremiah – a lot of attention because they are seen as holding references to the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. Not an entirely accurate understanding by the way, but we'll talk more about this later in this sermon series. What I hope we can do this morning is to begin our foray into studying the prophets with some basic background information, like we've been discussing, and then some specifics on the one prophet who is arguably the most significant prophet in the Old Testament. That would be Isaiah.

Before we begin that conversation, however, there are a few more things to know about prophets generally. Writing in *The People's Bible*, Biblical scholar Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan reminds us that a prominent theme in the books of the prophets is the relationship between prophecy (promises made by prophets) and fulfillment. In other words, the “words of a true prophet must come true.” This in turn tells us that “the stories and pronouncements of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible were likely preserved because what they said came true. Thus, the people found their stories and sayings to be meaningful and informative for

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<sup>1</sup> [Prophet - Wikipedia](#)

their understanding of YHWH and God's activities in the history of Israel.<sup>2</sup> Another prominent theme in the prophets is "God's covenant faithfulness which is often contrasted with Israel's infidelity and idolatry."<sup>3</sup> This is because Israel often struggled to really understand just who this YHWH was and what the relationship between the people and YHWH was supposed to be. The prophets also emphasize the ethical norms of the Torah which itself called for "caring for the vulnerable of society, justice in every facet of life, and mutuality among all the people as God's people."<sup>4</sup> Put another way, the prophets held the people accountable for how well they were living into their covenant relationship with God. They repeatedly emphasized that orthodoxy or right belief and orthopraxy or right action were two separate things. Right belief on its own would never be enough. Only the joining of right belief centering on the inherent love of God for all people with right action towards each other among those people would allow a vibrant and living relationship between God and the people to develop. Making sure the people were doing their part was the prophet's sole purpose.

So, that brings us to our first prophet to be considered in this series – Isaiah. It is one of the longest books in the entire Bible and the Hebrew Scriptures book most often quoted in the New Testament. It covers a long period of history, roughly 400 years, meaning it could not have been written by one person. This points to an often overlooked reality that a percentage of the writings in Isaiah originated not just from the original Isaiah but also from some sort of prophets school set up around his prophecy and teachings and from which the later writings in the book originated. The book contains prophetic warnings against Israel and Judah, apocalyptic visions, woe-oracles and the promise of a righteous ruler, hope for restoration and homecoming to a rebuilt community.<sup>5</sup> The book begins as most prophetic books do with Isaiah identifying himself as a prophet: "*The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*" This tells us who he is and his prophecies come to him at times in the form of visions.

One of the most powerful and vividly described of Isaiah's visions appears early on at the beginning of Chapter 6. In this extraordinary vision which culminates in Isaiah's call to be a prophet, he describes a personal and direct

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<sup>2</sup> Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, "The Prophets – Introduction," *The People's Bible*. p. 810-11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "Isaiah," *The People's Bible*, p. 814-5.

encounter with God. He begins with a historical reference – “In the year King Uzziah died.” Thus, he is rooting this prophecy in real time. Then he goes right into the vision: “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple.” In other words, it seems to Isaiah that God is so large just the hem of his robe filled the entire temple. Did he see God’s face or even God’s feet? We don’t know. He doesn’t say. What he is describing in these words is his sense of the reality of the presence of God. It is other worldly and ethereal yet it is very tangible. God is surrounded by seraphs, strange winged angel-like creatures who are hovering around God and chanting “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The chanting was so loud that the building shook and then it filled with smoke. Isaiah was terrified. He admits it, saying, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

So, Isaiah is terrified at this point in the vision, now that he has some appreciation of how vast and how powerful God is. And he’s asking, who is he, Isaiah, to be there in God’s immediate presence? He is a mere man who says the wrong things all the times and he comes from a people who do the same. He recognizes immediately that he is clearly not worthy to be in God’s presence yet there he is.

Then the vision shifts again as one of the seraphs takes one of the live coals from the smoking brazier and brings the coal to Isaiah in a pair of tongs. He touches the burning coal to Isaiah’s mouth and says, “now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Immediately he heard God’s voice asking, “whom shall I send and who will go for us?” Isaiah immediately answers, “Here am I; send me!” The text continues on with some more specific instructions on what Isaiah is to do, but I want us to focus on Isaiah’s vision of God which ended in his call to the ministry of prophecy. It is really quite extraordinary when you stop to think about it. The vastness of God’s being dwarfs him and the scary seraphs flying around in the smoky temple were intimidating, to say the least. Isaiah even admits his fear when he cries out “woe is me!” But then, when God asks for someone willing to go and do this work of prophesying, of ministering, to God’s beloved people, Isaiah forgets his fear and says to God, “here am I! Send me.”

Here am I. Send me. Of all of Isaiah’s visions and prophetic statements, this story is the one which sticks with me. This vision beautifully captures the

abject fear anyone who dares to believe they have a call from God to any kind of ministry feels. That's why this particular text is often part of ordination services. But this text is not just about people with a call to ordained ministry. It is about everyone because every single person has some call unique to them which comes directly from God. To understand this call, as Isaiah did in this vision, you must first have some sense of God's enormity juxtaposed with your own insignificance. This is the first step in coming to grips with who God is and who you are in relationship to and with God. The miracle of this relationship is that this enormous God who defies all attempts to quantify the limits of God's self knows who you are, created you to be who you are, loves you as you are and needs you to be part of God's unfolding plans for the world. That, dear ones is simply astonishing and amazing. And in the moment of this vision, Isaiah understood that and communicated it better than anyone else ever has. His sense of who God is and who God needs us to be is still as vivid and as valid now as it was thousands of years ago when he first described it. That, dear ones, is extraordinary.

What's even more extraordinary is the message here that each of us is called by God to do some of the work of prophecy. Each of us called by God to name injustice when we see it, to care for the needs of the most vulnerable among us, to do the right thing even when going along to get along is so much easier. What's even more amazing is that modern day prophets are all around us, and we've seen and experienced more of that in this last week and the weeks and months before that than ever before. Renee Nicole Good was a prophet when she told the ICE agent, she wasn't mad at him as she drove away expecting that would de-escalate the situation. It didn't. Governor Waltz and so many others in our own country and around the world acted prophetically when they named this shooting as the evil and illegal action that it was. Everyone who protested this action in the hours and days afterward is practicing, living prophecy.

But make no mistake, prophecy is dangerous business. MLK, Jr. found that out. President John Kennedy found that out and so did his brother Robert. All the resistance workers of WWII in Europe found that out but their call to justice was too strong to deny. The Freedom Riders who went into the segregated South on the 1960's to fight for equal rights for all people, regardless of race or ethnicity. We must, though, always be on guard against false prophecy. Remember one of the most important qualifiers of whether or not a

prophecy is truly from God is whether or not it comes true. Sadly, sometimes good people can be duped by bad prophecy to do bad things. The internment camps for Japanese citizens here in this country came about as a result of bad prophecy. The rationale behind it was never true so the prophecy behind it was false. Unfortunately, this happens all the time. Prophecies claiming justifications for all kinds of evil actions – like slavery for example – can be so very tempting as they are almost always accompanied by promises of riches and prosperity and power – a very tempting trinity of rewards in exchange for accepting or even just looking the other way as evil makes its move. We must always be wary of false prophecy, dear ones, and it is everywhere these days. The truth of any prophecy, though, is this. Does it come from a place of love and justice for all God's people or not? If not, it's false. Period.

So, dear ones, prophecy has a long history stretching back millennia. The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures are very much a part of who we understand ourselves to be as followers of Jesus. Therefore, it only makes sense as a part of our own decision to grow in the faith that we must deepen our understandings of the prophets and what God called them to tell us, to teach us. Perhaps their most important function is to remind us, over and over again, how much we still have to learn about God and ourselves in relation to God. I hope you are excited to continue on this exploration of the prophets with me. As we go along, don't hesitate to talk with me about your questions. I promise you will have many of them – and that's a good thing! God loves questions! Next week – Jeremiah!! Amen.