

PROPHETS - Introduction - Eugene Peterson - from The Message

Over a period of several hundred years, the Hebrew people gave birth to an extraordinary number of prophets—men and women distinguished by the power and skill with which they presented the reality of God. They delivered God’s commands and promises and living presence to communities and nations who had been living on god-fantasies and god-lies.

Everyone more or less believes in God. But most of us do our best to keep God on the margins of our lives or, failing that, refashion God to suit our convenience. Prophets insist that God is the sovereign center, not off in the wings awaiting our beck and call. And prophets insist that we deal with God as God reveals himself, not as we imagine him to be.

These men and women woke people up to the sovereign presence of God in their lives. They yelled, they wept, they rebuked, they soothed, they challenged, they comforted. They used words with power and imagination, whether blunt or subtle.

Sixteen of these prophets wrote what they spoke. We call them “the writing prophets.” They comprise the section from Isaiah to Malachi in our Bibles. These sixteen Hebrew prophets provide the help we so badly need if we are to stay alert and knowledgeable regarding the conditions in which we cultivate faithful and obedient lives before God. For the ways of the world—its assumptions, its values, its methods of going about its work—are never on the side of God. Never.

The prophets purge our imaginations of this world’s assumptions on how life is lived and what counts in life. Over and over again, God the Holy Spirit uses these prophets to separate his people from the cultures in which they live, putting them back on the path of simple faith and obedience and worship in defiance of all that the world admires and rewards. Prophets train us in discerning the difference between the ways of the world and the ways of the gospel, keeping us present to the Presence of God.

We don’t read very many pages into the Prophets before realizing that there was nothing easygoing about them. Prophets were not popular figures. They never achieved celebrity status. They were decidedly uncongenial to the temperaments and dispositions of the people with whom they lived. And the centuries have not mellowed them. It’s understandable that we should have a difficult time coming to terms with them. They aren’t particularly sensitive to our feelings. They have very modest, as we would say, “relationship skills.” We like leaders, especially religious leaders, who understand our problems (“come alongside us” is our idiom for it), leaders with a touch of glamour, leaders who look good on posters and on television.

The hard-rock reality is that prophets don’t fit into our way of life.

For a people who are accustomed to “fitting God” into their lives, or, as we like to say, “making room for God,” the prophets are hard to take and easy to dismiss. The God of whom the prophets speak is far too large to fit into our lives. If we want anything to do with God, we have to fit into him.

The prophets are not “reasonable,” accommodating themselves to what makes sense to us. They are not diplomatic, tactfully negotiating an agreement that allows us a “say” in the outcome. What they do is haul us unceremoniously into a reality far too large to be accounted for by our explanations and expectations. They plunge us into mystery, immense and staggering.

Their words and visions penetrate the illusions with which we cocoon ourselves from reality. We humans have an enormous capacity for denial and for self-deceit. We incapacitate ourselves from dealing with the consequences of sin, for facing judgment, for embracing truth. Then the prophets step in and help us to first recognize and then enter the new life God has for us, the life that hope in God opens up.

They don’t explain God. They shake us out of old conventional habits of small-mindedness, of trivializing god-gossip, and set us on our feet in wonder and obedience and worship. If we insist on understanding them before we live into them, we will never get it.

Basically, the prophets did two things: They worked to get people to accept the worst as God’s judgment—not a religious catastrophe or a political disaster, but judgment. If what seems like the worst turns out to be God’s judgment, it can be embraced, not denied or avoided, for God is good and intends our salvation. So judgment, while certainly not what we human beings anticipate in our planned future, can never be the worst that can happen. It is the best, for it is the work of God to set the world, and us, right.

And the prophets worked to get people who were beaten down to open themselves up to hope in God’s future. In the wreckage of exile and death and humiliation and sin, the prophet ignited hope, opening lives to the new work of salvation that God is about at all times and everywhere.

One of the bad habits that we pick up early in our lives is separating things and people into secular and sacred. We assume that the secular is what we are more or less in charge of: our jobs, our time, our entertainment, our government, our social relations. The sacred is what God has charge of: worship and the Bible, heaven and hell, church and prayers. We then contrive to set aside a sacred place for God, designed, we say, to honor God but really intended to keep God in his place, leaving us free to have the final say about everything else that goes on.

Prophets will have none of this. They contend that everything, absolutely everything, takes place on sacred ground. God has something to say about every aspect of our lives: The way we feel and act in the so-called privacy of our hearts and homes, the way we make our money and the way we spend it, the politics we embrace, the wars we fight, the catastrophes we endure, the people we hurt and the people we help. Nothing is hidden from the scrutiny of God, nothing is exempt from the rule of God, nothing escapes the purposes of God. Holy, holy, holy.

Prophets make it impossible to evade God or make detours around God. Prophets insist on receiving God in every nook and cranny of life. For a prophet, God is more real than the next-door neighbor.

ISAIAH - Introduction

For Isaiah, words are watercolors and melodies and chisels to make truth and beauty and goodness. Or, as the case may be, hammers and swords and scalpels to unmake sin and guilt and rebellion. Isaiah does not merely convey information. He creates visions, delivers revelation, arouses belief. He is a poet in the most fundamental sense—a maker, making God present and that presence urgent. Isaiah is the supreme poet-prophet to come out of the Hebrew people.

Isaiah is a large presence in the lives of people who live by faith in God, who submit themselves to being shaped by the Word of God and are on the lookout for the holy. The Holy. The characteristic name for God in Isaiah is “The Holy.” As we read this large and comprehensive gathering of messages that were preached to the ancient people of Israel, we find ourselves immersed in both the presence and the action of The Holy.

The more hours we spend pondering the words of Isaiah, the more the word “holy” changes in our understanding. If “holy” was ever a pious, pastel-tinted word in our vocabularies, the Isaiah-preaching quickly turns it into something blazing. Holiness is the most attractive quality, the most intense experience we ever get of sheer life—authentic, firsthand living, not life looked at and enjoyed from a distance. We find ourselves in on the operations of God himself, not talking about them or reading about them. Holiness is a furnace that transforms the men and women who enter it. “Holy, Holy, Holy” is not needlepoint. It is the banner of a revolution, the revolution.

The book of Isaiah is expansive, dealing with virtually everything that is involved in being a people of God on this planet Earth. The impressive art of Isaiah involves taking the stuff of our ordinary and often disappointing human experience and showing us how it is the very stuff that God uses to create and save and give hope. As this vast panorama opens up before us, it turns out that nothing is unusable by God. He uses everything and everybody as material for his work, which is the remaking of the mess we have made of our lives.

“Symphony” is the term many find useful to capture the fusion of simplicity and complexity presented in the book of Isaiah. The major thrust is clearly God’s work of salvation: “The Salvation Symphony” (the name Isaiah means “God Saves”). The prominent themes repeated and developed throughout this vast symphonic work are judgment, comfort, and hope. All three elements are present on nearly every page, but each also gives distinction to the three “movements” of the book that so powerfully enact salvation: Messages of Judgment (chapters 1–39), Messages of Comfort (chapters 40–55), and Messages of Hope (chapters 56–66).