

Sermon: A Different Type of Caller ID

Year C, Proper 14

[Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16; Luke 12:32-40](#)

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Do you guys know what a dope slap is? I thought I did. And then it happened and I really understood why they called it a dope slap.

This was years ago and I was late and hot and still wandering the halls of MIT, anxiously trying to find the public presentation on micro-finance. For the previous 15 years, I had been working for internet start-ups, so coming to the lecture was one attempt to figure out what to do next because I was tired of watching wonderful resources getting poured into silly projects. I finally found the room and ditched my winter coat, so I could focus on three different organizations telling the same story: hard to get good programs in place, hard to get the money to loan out to small groups of people living on less than \$2/day, but once everything gets going, the organizations can almost immediately measure reductions in poverty, increases in children's education, especially of daughters, improvements in health, all with better than 99% repayment rates. To someone evaluating yet another internet dating platform, which will be exactly like all the others but much more profitable, promise, cross our hearts, the micro-finance presentations seemed like real progress, real change. Then the organizations showed their operating budgets.

I imagine everyone else in the room saw a risky business making a decent return. I saw that I no longer had to choose between caring for the poor and running a good business. There amidst the smell of wet wool and lousy pizza, God stopped sending me little nudges about attending seminary and delivered a thumping great dope slap. Clearly I had not been listening, or thinking very creatively, not really willing to challenge my safe little life. I don't think I'm all that special, I think God must still be speaking to all of us, quite often, yet we don't catch on.

Wouldn't it be helpful to have a kind of spiritual caller ID so we would know when God was pointing us in a new direction? To help us figure out when to ignore our own limited human desires pushing us away from God? We belong to a denomination that proclaims, "God is still speaking." So the problem must be in the listening, not in the speaking. Oh, I know that if you look on the internet, there are all sorts of people who think God is speaking to them on a great many topics with enormous contradictions. So how do we assess when they might be on to something?

In today's reading, we see Isaiah also struggling to work out what was human desire and what was God's intent. I'm not convinced that the Biblical prophets are people who see ahead into the future as much as they are folks who see below, look at what's pushing the current situation. In the first chapter, Isaiah is struggling with how likely it was for Jerusalem to stand given current events. He's been the advisor to a long line of Judean Kings, so he knows the answer the monarch wants. The royal court was very clear that 1) God lived in the Temple and 2) the Temple was the heart of Jerusalem therefore 3) Jerusalem would stand forever so their power was secure.

However, Isaiah looked more closely at what was happening in the world outside of Israel. With growing agricultural surpluses, armies had begun to move during the growing season. With big enough surpluses, armies could fight all the time, further and further away from home. The only limit on how far armies could go would be how much their monarch needed them close to keep

the peace at home. Up until that point, the death of a monarch meant that an empire fell apart, since the battle for power in the imperial capital was so intense.

The Assyrians had solved that, inventing a professional bureaucracy that had withstood the deaths of two monarchs already. When the third monarch died, King Hezekiah of Israel decided to rebel, no longer sending tribute and allying himself with Egypt. The Assyrian king surrounded Jerusalem, destroyed a Judean city 10 miles away and handed other Judean cities over to Hezekiah's rivals. King Hezekiah decided that paying tribute wasn't nearly as ugly as the alternative and rejoined the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians withdrew shortly after that decision. In the book of Kings, the historians attribute the Assyrian's withdrawal to God's intervention.

But Isaiah is not so sure; he sees a near miss based on human self interest. Isaiah looks out at his world and sees two regions capable of enormous agricultural surplus: the Tigris and Euphrates river valley and the Nile. And whether the army was coming or going to Egypt, there was Israel, directly in the way. Now that empires could be handed over as easily as bread at a banquet, what was to keep armies close to home (and therefore far away from Israel)? With armies on the move so large, so well equipped, so professional, how could Jerusalem possibly survive an attack? The Judean court might want very much for Jerusalem to stand in the face of such odds, but Isaiah wasn't sure the new innovations in imperial management were going to allow for that.

Human reasoning could take Isaiah only so far, so Isaiah asks God how to resolve the contradiction. The answer Isaiah gets is clear: stop going through the motions. Stop making empty sacrifices. Enough with the worship by rote. Start doing what God has wanted all along. It may be very comfortable to think of God as small enough to be contained in a single room of a single building of a single city, for the people to think worship could be cranked out by following a recipe. But God's dissatisfaction was clear to Isaiah. They need to stop pretending. They needed stay close to God and take care of each other, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plea for the widow. If they do that, nothing can trouble them, nothing can frighten them, they shall eat the good of the land.

Isaiah has his answer, and it seems like a good one. Don't try to keep God penned up in a back room of our hearts, don't go through the motions of worship, come with an open heart, stay close, take care of each other. Still, I like Isaiah's approach to looking under the surface, so here's what I wonder: Is Isaiah's process as useful as his answer? His process takes him through three stages.

Isaiah's first move is to recognize when the world is about to change and think it through. Get as far as human logic will take you. Do your research, pull together your resources, set your anchor even deeper in your community. Do all that you can. Then listen for God's new whispers on old suggestions: stay close and take care of each other. In Luke we heard much the same thing, "be dressed for action, have your lamps lit." Be ready for when the Son of Man comes, for when God shows us a new way. Stay close enough to hear the knock, be ready to take care of each other as we sit down to eat. Stay close. Take care of each other.

Stay close, have no idols before me, love the Lord your God with all your heart, might and strength. Stay close. God's direction is there. It's not my direction, or your sister's, or your neighbor's or Hollywood's or Washington's or Madison Avenue's or hidden in Biblical text that only an expert can extract for you. Don't go through the motions. Stay close.

Take care of each other. Honor your mother and father. Love your neighbor as yourself. Take care of each other. God's direction is there. If the new direction protects the powerful and the wealthy, if it further isolates or scapegoats those on the margin, if it makes it easier to go through the motions of faith without any real presence before God, then check the direction. God is with each one of us, never one instead of another. Take care of each other.

Isaiah's second move was to sense when human logic had taken him as far as it could; he seemed to have a good idea of where the danger zone was for slipping into wishful human thinking when perhaps it was time for God's voice to bring something new into being. Can we recognize the moments when logic has played its part and God's voice needs to be heard in our lives? Can we see our worlds changing and figure out a way to make our desires quiet so God's direction might come clear? When it is time to accept that we can no longer care on our own for our beloved wife of 53 years, or perhaps she can no longer care for us? When our son introduces us to his fiancé who's so lovely we'd adopt her if he doesn't marry her or perhaps so horrid we can't even put together an engagement toast that's not a lie? When it is time to take the best dog ever to the vets for the last time or bring him home from the pound for the first time? When we are alone, can we call on Jesus, whose message was often a variation on stay close, take care of each other. Can we open our ears, open our hearts as a faithful people and hear God's word?

Isaiah's third and final move is that he is not asking God for help on the day Jerusalem was surrounded, but looking ahead, when he's just imagining how the ground will tremble with all the armies marching over it. He has seen a near miss, but that danger has passed and everyone else is out celebrating. Isaiah is still listening. So our whole world can change in an instant, like mine did in that classroom. Isaiah teaches us about thinking it through, listening for God. Because we can tell it's God since God often says the same thing in different words: Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with God. Take care of each other. Stay close.