

## ISAIAH Core Team – What Can We Learn from the Prophets?

by Seminarian Kyle Anderson

A common misperception is that the primary focus of prophecy is to predict the future; however, prophets are most concerned about their present time. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that “the society and its conduct are the main theme” of prophetic speeches.<sup>1</sup> We live in a vastly unequal society in which the privileged live in comfort while others struggle to meet their basic needs. Most of us proceed daily without stopping to contemplate the impact that our social and economic structures have on our most vulnerable members. According to Heschel the prophets are voices crying out against the status quo.

To us a single act of injustice – cheating in business, exploitation of the poor – is slight; to the prophets, a disaster, To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.<sup>2</sup>

The passion shown by the prophets toward social justice would lead us today to describe the prophets as “woke.” In his sermon December 1, Pastor Javen stated that “Those who are ‘woke’ see things the way they really are, even when others can’t see it.”<sup>3</sup> Social change requires prophets speaking out against injustice. As we look ahead to 2020 please read on further for lessons from four prophets that can be applied as the ISAIAH core team looks ahead to some major events which include party caucuses (February 25) and the general election (November 3).

### *Amos – Righteous Anger*

Amos condemned the injustices that were being inflicted on the vulnerable in Israel. Amos’ prophecy occurred during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE and it was a time of prosperity in the kingdoms of

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets, Perennial Classics Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Heschel, “The Prophets,” 4.

<sup>3</sup> Javen Swanson, Sermon at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church on December 1, 2019 at 8:15 AM worship service.

Israel and Judah; however, it was also a time of massive inequality.<sup>4</sup> The rich lived in luxury as they had multiple residences (Amos 3:15) which were decorated with fine ivory work (Amos 3:15 and Amos 6:4), and built with hewn stone (Amos 5:11).<sup>5</sup> Amos 6 describes the luxuries enjoyed by the upper classes.

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! (Amos 6:4-6, NRSV).

The situation caused Amos to speak words of judgment on Israel. “Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals” (Amos 2:6, NRSV). “Indeed, I am raising up against you a nation, O house of Israel, says the Lord, the God of hosts ...” (Amos 6:14, NRSV).

Amos’ outrage at the social conditions in Israel was justified as the rich acquired their wealth by exploiting the poor. The poor were exploited by artificially high prices and deceptive business practices.<sup>6</sup> Amos was so angry because the luxuries enjoyed by the wealthy were the result of the oppression of the poor and the “social evils that helped create poverty and a dependent underclass in eighth-century Israel.”<sup>7</sup> Amos forces us to look at the welfare of all members of society and the impact that our economic and social practices have on the underprivileged. Amos

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 255-256.

<sup>5</sup> Simon B. Parker, “Amos.” In *The Books of the Bible I The Old Testament/Hebrew Bible*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 368.

<sup>6</sup> J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 372-373.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie J. Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 71.

calls us out of complacency as he “castigates those who enjoy a life of carefree luxury and remain at the same time oblivious to the violence and oppression on which it is based.”<sup>8</sup>

Our society looks very much like the one about which Amos prophesied. Some reside in luxurious homes while others struggle to find affordable housing. Some receive quality health care while others avoid seeing a doctor because they are not adequately insured. Some children attend well-resourced schools while other schools are forced to continue cutting services. The benefits should not just go to a few as God has provided to us an abundance of love that flows throughout our entire community. As Amos demonstrates anger can actually reflect a deep concern and care for others. When we see others struggling the love of God inspires us to be angry just as when Amos channeled his righteous anger because he saw that God’s blessings were not being shared by all. Amos focused righteous anger on issues of oppression and inequality.

### ***Micah – Setting Priorities***

Micah’s prophecy is commonly dated in the latter part of the eighth century BCE possibly as late as 715 BCE.<sup>9</sup> Micah addresses “a wide range of social and economic practices that incur divine wrath”<sup>10</sup> an example of which is the following passage which speaks about the rich depriving the poor of their lands.

Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance (Micah 2:1-2, NRSV).

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<sup>8</sup> Parker, “Amos,” 368.

<sup>9</sup> Bruegemann and Linafelt, “An Introduction to the Old Testament,” 266.

<sup>10</sup> Pleins, “The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible,” 381.

Injustice and oppression were so pervasive that “Micah pictures the inhabitants of Judah as so uninformed that they no longer know what Yahweh requires.”<sup>11</sup> This leads to Micah’s great insight when he “poses the most urgent question of religious existence: What is the way of true worship?”<sup>12</sup>

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8, NRSV).

God called for justice and Judah’s response focused on sacrificial liturgies which to Micah was insufficient.<sup>13</sup> The priorities of Micah’s community were disordered much like priorities are disordered in our politics today. Our political leaders often appear to be focused on battling their rivals and scoring points with their base, while failing to address significant problems like gun violence, inequality and climate change. We need to make our leaders aware of the priorities of ISALAH’s Faith Agenda which includes building an inclusive democracy and an economy that works for all people. One way to help set the priorities in our community is to attend the party caucuses on Tuesday February 25. Caucus meetings provide an opportunity to engage in conversation and to build understanding with neighbors. The issues raised across the state will eventually make it into party platforms, so it is essential to participate since the caucuses are important in setting the priorities that will be addressed by our political leaders.

In preparation for caucuses ISALAH leaders will be conducting house meetings. The intent of these events is to provide a forum for small group conversation in order to deepen and strengthen

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce V. Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible: What Is New and What Is Old* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>12</sup> Heschel, “The Prophets,” 129.

<sup>13</sup> Hoppe, “There Shall Be No Poor Among You,” 80.

relationships while creating opportunities for collective action grounded in faith values. Please be on the lookout for invitations from the ISAI AH core team to participate in house meetings and caucus trainings as we look to determine which priorities are most important to our community.

### ***Jeremiah – Holding Leaders Accountable***

The prophetic ministry of Jeremiah may have started in the late seventh century as possibly as early as 626 BCE.<sup>14</sup> Jeremiah was not afraid to speak boldly against the community’s rulers as he directly denounced royal figures in a set of texts starting at Jeremiah 21:11 and continuing to Jeremiah 22:30.<sup>15</sup> This section includes Jeremiah’s rebuke of Jehoiakim who refused to pay the laborers who worked on the expansion of his palace.<sup>16</sup>

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, “I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,” and who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. (Jeremiah 22:13-14, NRSV)

Jeremiah then asserts “that what makes a king is not the splendor of his palace but his administration of justice” as he compares Jehoiakim unfavorably to his father Josiah.<sup>17</sup>

Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? Says the Lord. (Jeremiah 22:15-16, NRSV)

This willingness to criticize leadership is particularly necessary when leaders are failing to serve the people. Holding leaders accountable will be a primary focus of ISAI AH during the upcoming session of the Minnesota State Legislature. Attending town hall meetings with legislators, showing up to offer support during committee hearings, and participating in rallies

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<sup>14</sup> Bruegemann and Linafelt, “An Introduction to the Old Testament,” 209.

<sup>15</sup> Pleins, “The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible,” 284–287.

<sup>16</sup> Hoppe, “There Shall Be No Poor Among You,” 88.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

are all things that ISAI AH leaders will be doing during the upcoming legislative session. It is important that we keep the pressure on elected officials to let them know that they are there to serve the interests of the community. Be on the lookout for announcements from the ISAI AH core team regarding these opportunities to hold our leaders accountable by engaging in direct actions.

### *Isaiah – Vision of the Future*

The book of Isaiah is rooted in the prophecy of Isaiah who appears to have lived in Jerusalem between 742 and 689 BCE.<sup>18</sup> Isaiah like other prophets attacks the wealthy and the privileged. A distinguishing characteristic of the book of Isaiah is its hopeful vision of a better future as “[j]ustice will be the leading characteristic of the age to come.”<sup>19</sup> Chapters 60 through 62 “in grand lyrical fashion anticipate future well-being for Israel.”<sup>20</sup> A vision of good news is proclaimed in Isaiah 61:1-4.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:1-4, NRSV).

This powerful vision is very important because it shows us what our community will look like some day in the future. Working for social justice is not easy as it often means challenging established powers and entrenched interests. A vision like Isaiah 61:1-4 helps us to stay motivated in the face of adversity. There is much cynicism, fear and hate in this world so a

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<sup>18</sup> Bruegemann and Linafelt, “An Introduction to the Old Testament,” 191.

<sup>19</sup> Malchow, “Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible,” 45.

<sup>20</sup> Bruegemann and Linafelt, “An Introduction to the Old Testament,” 203.

message of optimism, hope and love is essential as our guiding light as we work to build an inclusive democracy and an economy that works for everyone.

### ***The Road Ahead***

We invite all those with a passion for social justice to become involved with the work of the ISALAH core team at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church. Please contact Pastor Javen for more information about the work of the team. Major 2020 events include party caucuses (Tuesday February 25), the Minnesota legislative session (Tuesday February 11 through Monday May 18), the primary election (Tuesday August 11), and the general election (Tuesday November 3). Also please look for announcements which will include invitations to participate in house meetings, caucus trainings, and other events in the year ahead.