

Opening prayer: God of justice, just as you spoke to the prophet Isaiah, speak to us now in this time. Guide us in your truth, in the name of your son Jesus, Amen.

Last January, I took what has become my favorite class in seminary: *Bonhoeffer and King: Public Theologians*.

As you might guess from the course title, this class focused on two of the most important theologians of the 20th century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. Both of these ministers were public theologians, that is, their ministry was inextricably tied to and sought to change their social context. Their theology was lived out in the public sphere, and it was formed out of the specific time and place in which each man lived.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a Civil Rights activist and Baptist minister whose theology springs from his work fighting against racism and other forms of discrimination in the Jim Crow south of the 1950s and 60s. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor whose theology was largely shaped by his work against the Nazi regime that had taken hold of his country.

These men share the prophetic identity that we see bestowed upon Isaiah in our [first] reading today.

I have always found the Biblical prophets fascinating. One reason for this is the way that they hold contradictions within themselves.

The prophet is but a humble and obedient servant, but the prophet is also bestowed with the awesome power of direct communication with God.

The prophet has this divinely-given power, but the power does not protect them (as power usually does in our world). Rather, this power puts a target on the prophet's back.

The prophet is given a specific message and mission from God, a clear path forward, but this path is often the last place that the prophet wants to go. Jonah tried to run from his prophetic call so much that he found himself in the belly of a whale. Samuel doesn't recognize God's voice, Jeremiah says he is too young, Moses rejects God's call repeatedly.

But despite their protesting, despite their lowly status, despite their fear and trembling, the prophets are given the most important of tasks.

The prophet's call is to disrupt corrupt systems that harm God's children. The prophet's call is to speak truth to power. The prophet's call is to be the voice of justice.

I loved my *Bonhoeffer and King* class because each of these men is a theological titan who left an indelible mark on our world. They demonstrated Christlike commitment to loving their neighbor by speaking and acting out against the mistreatment of God's children. Their commitment to their prophetic call to work for God's justice took them all the way to the cross of Christ, as they were each martyred by the hateful movements that they stood against.

My *Bonhoeffer and King* class was valuable because we learned about these monumental leaders in our church history. But it was also valuable because we learned about the contexts in which each man found himself when he was called into prophetic ministry. We learned about how the stage was set, how systems became corrupted, to the point that a prophet needed to rise up.

And hear me when I say that there were many similarities between their contexts and our own.

Let me explain.

Being a seminary class, our primary focus was on the religious aspects of each man's historical context.

And while of course 1930s Germany and 1960s America's Deep South are different settings, there are similarities in the religious rhetoric that was used by the hate movements that Bonhoeffer and King worked against.

In both cases, the movements deemphasize scripture, Christology, and other core tenants of the Christian faith. Jesus' message of care for the neighbor, of self-sacrifice for the good of the other, of welcoming the stranger in one's midst, seem to be forgotten.

Instead, God's name is invoked to present one particular group as God's chosen people. Chosen, and therefore superior. Superior, and therefore justified in committing atrocities against those who are "not chosen." In King's context, the Klan believed white Americans were God's chosen people. In Bonhoeffer's, it was Aryan Germans.

And today, Christian Nationalism follows in the same footsteps. Despite the name, the “Christian” faith upheld by this movement is hollow and supremacist like that of Bonhoeffer and King’s opponents. It leans not on scripture but on the desire for power, prioritizing a chosen people at the pain of all those who are “othered”.

What is a Christianity that does not heed Christ’s message of sacrificial love? That prioritizes authoritarian politics over the liberating news of the gospel?

The Cost of Discipleship is the name of Bonhoeffer’s most famous book. As you hear in the name, the text points to the costly nature of becoming a follower of Jesus. It argues against a faith that is easy and comfortable, because this is not the faith that Jesus taught. Jesus taught us to take up our cross and follow Him.

Bonhoeffer writes, “If our Christianity has ceased to be serious about discipleship, if we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift which makes no costly demands and which fails to distinguish between natural and Christian existence, then we cannot help regarding the cross as an ordinary everyday calamity, as one of the trials and tribulations of life... The cross means sharing the suffering of Christ to the last and to the fullest... The cross is laid on every Christian.”

Being a Christian isn’t about hoarding power for oneself, it isn’t about attacking those who are different from you. It is about the cross, it’s about seeing beyond yourself and giving up what you have for the benefit of another.

We cannot let the message of the cross be drowned out by false promises of glory.

As we move into the new reality that our recent election results bring, we all will need to be moved to act like the prophets, speaking the truth about the cross, about the boundless love of Jesus, about the cost of discipleship.

I know that what I’m saying may not be a message that you want to hear this morning. But I tell you this truth, that I could not stand in the face of the prophet Isaiah, and all the prophets that have come before and after him, and not speak these words that God has laid on my heart.

Our reading for today cuts short Isaiah’s full call story. We have the theophany, the appearance of God, described in vivid detail with many-winged seraphs. We have Isaiah’s resistance of the prophetic call, as he

anguishes over his unclean lips. After he is cleansed with a hot coal, Isaiah answers God's call saying "Here am I; send me!"

But what our reading leaves out is the message that God gives to Isaiah, the words that send Isaiah out to prophesy to the people. I'd like to read the rest of Isaiah 6 so that we get the full picture of this call story. I'll begin with verse 8 so we hear the connection to the lectionary reading.

⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

⁹And he said, "Go and say to this people:
'Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.'

¹⁰Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes
and listen with their ears
and comprehend with their minds
and turn and be healed."

¹¹Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said,
"Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;

¹²until the Lord sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

¹³Even if a tenth part remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled."

(The holy seed is its stump.)

Being a prophet is hard, because you have an important message to share, but people do not want to hear it. But then of course, a prophet wouldn't really be a prophet if they were just saying things that were agreeable and held up the status quo.

No, a prophet must speak out against injustice, even though people shut their minds and eyes and ears to their words.

They speak out, even if they know that destruction is coming.

They speak out because of their trust in God and their faith in a better future. And no one demonstrated this better than Jesus.

Again Bonhoeffer writes, “We have been transformed into the image of Christ, and are therefore destined to be like him. He is the only pattern we must follow. And because he really lives his life in us, we too can ‘walk even as he walked’ (1 John 2.6), and ‘do as he has done’ (John 13.15), ‘love as he has loved’ (Eph. 5.2; John 13.34; 15.12), ‘forgive as he forgave’ (Col. 3.13), ‘have this mind, which was also in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 2.5), and therefore we are able to follow the example he has left us (1 Pet. 2.21), lay down our lives for the brethren as he did (1 John 3.16).”

Let us close in prayer.

King of heaven and earth,

As you cleansed Isaiah with a coal of fire to prepare him for proclaiming your word to the world, prepare us, so that we may know your bidding and carry out our callings with eagerness and urgency. Show the world greatness that cannot be contained any more than smoke or fire can be caught, in the name of the one who sacrificed everything to carry out your commands, Jesus Christ our sanctifier. Amen.