

WHEN TRUTH IS A MATTER OF TIMING

Scriptures: Isaiah 4:2-6; 3:13-26

I heard this story from a Lutheran pastor back when I was serving both the Lutheran and Presbyterian churches in Potlatch, Idaho. A Kansas farmer went to court seeking compensation from an insurance company for injuries received in a car accident. During the trial the lawyer for the insurance company asked him, “Isn’t it true that shortly after the accident you told an officer on the scene, ‘I think I’m feeling better now’?”

“Well,” said the farmer, “it’s like this. Me and my cow Bessie, we were going down the road when...”

“Stop,” said the lawyer. “You’re not answering the question. Did you or did you not say right after the accident, ‘I think I’m feeling better now’?”

“Well,” said the farmer, “me and my cow Bessie, we were going down the road when all of a sudden this truck ...”

“Objection,” shouted the lawyer. “The witness is evading the question.”

“Just let him finish his story,” the judge replied. So the farmer began again. “Me and my cow Bessie, we were going down the road when all of a sudden this truck crossed the center line and hit us. I went flying this way, and Bessie when flying that way, and when I came to, I saw a police officer standing over Bessie shaking his head. He said, “She’s badly hurt. I don’t think she’s going to make it.” And he pulled out his gun and shot her. Then he said to me, “How are you feeling?”

Believe it or not, this story is actually relevant to our scripture readings for today. The lesson in this story is pay attention to the context. You cannot understand what people say unless you understand the situation in which they say it. And that is true for God as well for people.

With that in mind, take a pew Bible and turn back to our first scripture lesson from Isaiah 3 (OT, p. 633). Did you notice the contradictory tone of our two scripture readings? The first scripture reading is a scathing pronouncement of doom on the people of Israel. Look at Isaiah 3:17: “The Lord will afflict with scabs the heads of the daughters of Zion (another name for Jerusalem), and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts.” Look also at verses 24-26:

Instead of perfume there will be a stench; and instead of a sash, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness (it sounds like Britney Spears); and instead of a rich robe, a binding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame. Your men shall fall by the sword and your warriors in battle. And her gates shall lament and mourn; ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground.

The pride and prosperity of Jerusalem is about to come crashing down.

But now look at our second scripture lesson in chapter 4, beginning at verse 2:

On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious (in other parts of the Old Testament the branch of the Lord symbolizes a new faithful ruler for the people of Israel), and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst....

In chapter 3 God announces judgment on the people of Israel, and in chapter 4 God promises blessing. What is going on?

The answer lies in understanding the context—the situation. Isaiah, chapter 3, was probably spoken to the people of Israel in the time of King Jotham, early in Isaiah’s ministry. In II Chronicles, one of the historical books of the Old Testament, we learn that King Jotham defeated Israel’s enemies, the Ammonites, and forced them to pay a huge tax to the people of Israel in Jerusalem (II Chronicles 27:5). As a result the people of Jerusalem were quite prosperous. You can see this in Isaiah 3:18-22. Look at the list of all the things the women of Jerusalem could afford to buy for themselves: anklets, headbands, crescents, pendants, bracelets, scarves, sashes, perfume boxes, rings, festal robes, cloaks, handbags. They are a walking advertisement for Nordstrom.

But in chapter 4 the situation has changed. You can see this in the little details mentioned in these verses. Isaiah 4:2 says, “The fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel.” Did you notice that word survivors? Verse 4 says, “Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy....” Apparently many of the people of Jerusalem have fled or been killed or taken away. Isaiah 4 is spoken to people in Jerusalem who have survived some horrible disaster, like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The disaster, we learn from other parts of the Bible, was the invasion of the Assyrian army that happened in the time of King Hezekiah, late in Isaiah’s ministry.

The point is that God tailors the message to the situation. In Isaiah 3 the people of Jerusalem have become rich and proud by exploiting the poor and weak. Look at verses 14 and 15: “The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses.” “Do you know why you are rich?” the Lord says. “Do you know why you have all this stuff to wear? Because the people who made it for you have not been paid very much, because their land has been taken over by your companies and the taxes they pay have been used to make you rich.” In that situation the Lord has a warning: Watch out; judgment is coming. If you think you are on top of the world, if you think you are doing just fine without committing your life to God, if you think you have earned and deserve all the good that has come into your life without realizing that it is all a gift and that is meant to be shared; if you do not realize this, then, friends, I would be worried. I would begin a serious re-evaluation of your life, because judgment is coming, says the Lord, judgment is coming.

On the other hand, when the people of Jerusalem are crushed, like in chapter 4, God has a completely different message: a message of hope and restoration. If you are beginning to sense that maybe you are not in control of your life; if you are beginning to realize just how helpless you are in the face of a sudden disaster: cancer, a car accident, loss of a job, loss of a family member, a devastating storm, a human act of violence, the collapse of our nation's economy or of your own household economy—if you are beginning to realize how fragile and helpless you are in the face of forces you cannot control, then God has a message for you. As Isaiah says at the end of chapter 4, the Lord will create over you a canopy. “It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.”

God always tailors the message to the situation. To those who are proud, those who are greedy, those who do not realize their need for God, God issues a warning. But to those who feel fragile and vulnerable, who turn to God because they know not where else to turn, to them God offers comfort and hope.

By the way, I think this principle also applies to how we should talk about God to other people. I think that we too must tailor our words about God to the situation. I once visited a family who had lost a relatively young husband and father in a car accident. While I was there, a well-meaning friend said to the family, “I know you feel bad, but just remember: he's gone to a better place.” Somehow that was not very helpful at that moment. Not because it was untrue but because it was not timely. The family at that moment did not need to be told about a God who takes our loved ones away to heaven. They needed to hear about a God who comes to us here on earth, a God who lives among us and shares with us the numbing emptiness of losing a person you love.

I could share many other examples, but let me share one more. If a family has a young adult son or daughter who has gotten into trouble, they do not need to hear the verse in Proverbs which says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” That may be a good verse for parents just starting out to raise their children, but it is not helpful to the parents of a wayward teenager or adult. The word of God for those parents is found in Philippians 4:6-7: “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” That is the word of God those parents need to hear.

Truth is sometimes a matter of timing. The word God speaks to people is not only true but timely. It brings down the proud and lifts up the lowly. It confronts those who think they are righteous and forgives those who know they aren't. It comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

Which are you?

- Ken Onstot
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