

Series: Messages From the Major Prophets

UTTERLY WASTED

ISAIAH 60:12 & OTHERS

Text: Isaiah 60:12

Isaiah 60:12

¹² *For the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish; yea, those nations shall be **utterly wasted**.*

Psalm 33:12

¹² ***Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD;** and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance.*

Proverbs 14:34

³⁴ ***Righteousness exalteth a nation;** but sin is a reproach to any people.*

Introduction:

Most of us place a high value on "personal" messages. Form letters and mass mailings are the norm in our day, so it is very refreshing to receive a "personal" note from a person or organization.

While many preachers today try to apply messages written for Israel to America, certainly the passage that we read in Proverbs is a blanket statement to Any and All nations.

These truths still hold true for any nation today. History is littered with the echoes of failed nations. Nineveh, the Egyptian Dynasty, Greece, the Roman Empire....

Today, the United States is a proof text for this verse!

Let us see how as we divide the thoughts into four sections.

1. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF A NATION “RIGHTEOUSNESS”

This is a word seldom uttered outside of conservative churches today.

I read an article this week from a man that I graduated high school with who is the “pastor of the Clemson United Methodist Church:

My beloved United Methodist Church is in the news quite a lot these days. CNN, MSBNC, FOX News, USA Today. We are everywhere.

Sadly, it's not because of our relief efforts in the Philippines, or the growth of our church amongst Millenials. We are in the news because of our church trials. And 2014 promises to be a banner year for more church trials related to clergy officiating same-sex marriages.

Church trials are not uncommon in the United Methodist Church. I once served on a jury of a church trial. In many

instances clergypersons are charged with some kind of moral lapse: adultery, dishonesty, and the like. But the news accounts today are highlighting a growing trend of clergy trials where the defendant has made a decision to preside at a same-sex union, something prohibited by our Book of Discipline.

Even among the ranks of the episcopacy, Bishop Melvin Talbert presided at such a service in Alabama. And the Council of Bishops, in a formal statement, are recommending he be brought up on charges in order to maintain the standards of our church's polity. The bishops write, "We respectfully request that Bishop Wenner, President of the Council of Bishops, and Bishop Wallace-Padgett, Resident Bishop of the North Alabama Conference, address the action of Bishop Talbert and file a complaint under the provisions of Paragraph 413 for undermining the ministry of a colleague (Paragraph 2702.1f) and conducting a ceremony to celebrate the marriage of a same gender couple (Paragraph 2702.1b) within the bounds of the North Alabama Conference."

The request from our bishops comes from a conviction of the call to give appropriate oversight to the church. As the bishops say, "The purpose of the Council of Bishops is to lead the church in its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. To that end, bishops are also required to 'uphold the discipline and order of the Church...and to share with other bishops in the oversight of the whole church.' (Para 403.1.f) When there are violations of the Book of Discipline, a response is required."

And yet, the situation may not be quite as clear as their announcement suggests. The implication of the statement is that since we have rules, and bishops are charged with upholding these rules (as are all elders), it is appropriate

and right that the rules be enforced so as to keep us aligned with our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Consider, however, the very foundations of the Methodist community as a reluctant reform movement within the Church of England. John Wesley sought to abide by canon law within his ecclesial tradition as he formed a people called Methodist. Our history reminds us, however, that he finally reached a breaking point when he saw the need for ordained clergy in the American colonies. His sense of pastoral response and duty led him to choose between the law of the church and the mission of forming disciples. So writes Methodist scholar Ted Campbell: “John Wesley tried...to secure ordained clergy through normal processes of the Church of England, but he was not satisfied... Having his own theological justification, he proceeded in early September of 1784 to ordain clergy for North America... Since he was not himself a bishop, his ordinations violated the canons of his own Church...”

Wesley’s violation of the order of his church did not come easy. He wrangled over his sense of obedience to the Church of England and his understanding of his call from God. His sense of mission, dare we say to make disciples of Jesus and transform the world, was what drove him ultimately to veer beyond the accepted polity. We are, therefore, a church born out of dissent. And that practice has continued in our history.

Consider the prohibition of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South with respect to preaching in favor of the abolitionist movement. Or the pastors who knowingly violated the Book of Discipline’s prohibition against women serving in clergy roles. It’s true, some simply left their denomination as the ground shifted: “The first challenge to Methodism came in 1880 when two Methodist women, Anna Oliver and

Anna Howard Shaw, came before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, North, seeking ordination...Unfortunately, not only was the request for ordination denied, but the conference voted to rescind the existing rule that allowed women to have a local license to preach. Soon thereafter, Anna Howard Shaw left the Methodist Episcopal Church, North..."

Leaving was not the only option, however, as others remained and pushed against the restrictions of polity, restrictions that ultimately squelched the church's ability to remain aligned with its mission when it came to women. Because of the resistance to the polity and, with the help of the Spirit, the inclusion of women began.

Like so many things in life, the issue of obedience to the Book of Discipline is not always as clear as the bishops' statement suggests. In matters of race, women's rights, and other issues, we have a history of the church being transformed by the shifting culture toward inclusion. Indeed, the church has been impacted positively when her leaders have stood against those positions that failed to recognize the equality and blessedness of all.

And so here we are, a people who proclaim that in Jesus the world is transformed. But when it comes to recognizing the sacred worth of persons in the LGBT community, we are seeing transformation take place outside of the church. Over the years perhaps we will catch up with the culture in realizing fully the sacred worth of sisters and brothers who are LGBT, but what are we to do in the meantime?

The United Methodist Church was in the news Thanksgiving week as the story of Rev. Frank Schaefer was convicted in a church trial of violating our Book of Discipline. He presided at the wedding of his son, a

homosexual person of sacred worth, who was married several years ago. The son asked his father to preside at the service and Rev. Schaefer agreed to do so. And once again, the United Methodist Church has become known as a church that punishes clergy for presiding at their children's same-sex unions.

All of this press coverage has raised questions in my own soul as I've considered what my response will be when someone I love asks me to preside at their marriage. Actually, it's caused me to reflect on the people at the church I now serve. We are blessed with a strong and vibrant youth and college ministry. I've gotten to know these young people during my years of service. What will my response be when one of them comes to me and asks, "Will you preside at our wedding?" When one of my members asks, what will I say to her?

I could say, "I'm sorry. I can't. Our Book of Discipline says your lifestyle is incompatible with Christian teaching. Your marriage is a sin."

My comment: Our loyalty is not to a book of discipline but to the "Word of God." I'm amazed that a book of disciplines must be written in an attempt to bolster the "Word of God."

Another option: "I'm sorry. I can't. Our Book of Discipline won't allow me to officiate your wedding. The United Church of Christ pastor down the street might help us out. You don't know her, but she can do it."

Or I might say simply, "You know I will. You are one of my people and, more than that, you are one of God's people. I am honored to be a part of your special day."

Which response really seems rooted in our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?

Our tradition teaches us that sometimes we must be willing to push the boundaries of our polity. Because God continues to work with us, just as God did in the book of Acts, to extend grace and love to all of humanity. It was in that early New Testament community of Acts that many argued against expanding the reach of the church to the uncircumcised. But some dared to break the norm and discipline of the early church. And that's when God affirmed their disobedience as the Spirit descended upon the outsiders, the ones declared unclean by some of the religious. I believe that same Spirit of dissent is still moving today.

So when I now consider a person I've watched grow up in the love of the church coming and asking for a blessing as she and her beloved offer themselves in a holy covenant, who am I to prohibit them from the blessing of the church? I cannot. I will not.

And that's a trial I'm willing to bear.

Keith D. Ray II
Clemson United Methodist Church
Clemson, South Carolina

Reprinted from the January 2014 issue of the SC United Methodist Advocate

You don't hear our politicians speak about righteousness.

You don't hear the news media say anything about it or at least in a positive way.

There are at least two implications of the word, righteousness.

Note:

- It Implies a Standard

Society today does not want a standard; they will not even acknowledge that one exists. This is the main reason that the Word of God has been attacked and ridiculed by unbelievers.

Psalm 119:40

⁴⁰ *Behold, I have longed after thy precepts: quicken me in thy righteousness.*

Psalm 119:142

¹⁴² *Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and thy law is the truth.*

At the founding of our nation, the Bible was held in high esteem. There are both direct and indirect quotations in the correspondence of the founding fathers.

Note also:

- It Implies Straightness

It is one thing to admit that there is a standard, it is quite another to make that standard your own.

The word in our text speaks about a personal righteousness, a personal morality.

Deuteronomy 4:5

⁵ Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it.

Notice not only the “Righteousness of a Nation” but also:

2. THE REWARD OF A NATION – “EXHALTETH A NATION”

Who can doubt that America has been exalted among the nations?

The mentality is that we somehow deserve the greatness and power of our past.

That is a sad mistake to make.

America has not been exalted because of its citizens goodness and personal holiness!

America has not been exalted because of the churches that have carried out the great commission both at home and abroad!

It is because of past righteousness and obedience with humility that we now enjoy a preeminent place on the world scene.

Note

- An Exalted Nation is Set Apart

One meaning of exalted means to Lifted Up

The Bible teaches us that God Himself is exalted, the scripture is exalted, and Israel is exalted above the nations. But in this verse we find a promise that the righteous nation also will be lifted up and made high.

Psalm 46:10

¹⁰ *Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.*

Psalm 37:34

³⁴ *Wait on the LORD, and keep his way, and he shall*

exalt thee to inherit the land: when the wicked are cut off, thou shalt see it.

Surely there is no nation in the history of the world which has been lifted up and exalted more than America! The United States has dominated history throughout the 20th century.

- An Exalted Nation Is Safe

Another meaning of exalted mean to raised high out of the reach of danger.

Psalm 32:7

⁷ Thou art my hiding place; thou shalt preserve me from trouble; thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance. Selah.

Psalm 119:114

¹¹⁴ Thou art my hiding place and my shield: I hope in thy word.

We have been spared by many things that have destroyed many other nations.

Not until recently have we had issues with terrorism on our soil.

An Exalted Nation Is Strong

Another shade of meaning of the word "exalt" is "to triumph over enemies."

A mere glance at the history of America will reveal the hand of God's protection watching over us in war and in peace.

Think of the odds of the colonies defeating the most powerful nation in the 18th century world, the British Empire. Yet, it happened.

We take for granted our victory in the Revolutionary War.

We assume that our power then resembled our power today. Not true!

It was a miracle from God that America gained her freedom from England.

Why did the Civil War not tear this nation apart?

Could it have been the protection of God?

In World War II, America took on much of the world essentially single handedly and assured freedom throughout the globe.

There was a time when our citizens proudly said, "America has never lost a war!"

We must give God the glory for past victories for He has protected us.

Psalm 144:1

¹ Blessed be the LORD my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight:

Notice not only the “Righteousness of a Nation” and the “Reward of a Nation” but also:

3. THE REPROACH OF A NATION

Isaiah 60:12

¹² For the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted.

Proverbs 14:34

³⁴ Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.

Note:

Notice the truth regarding nations who sin and will not serve the Lord.

As sure as righteousness exalts a nation – sin destroys it.

Today many people want what I refer to as a buffet type or Burger King religion.

Pick and choose what they want or the “Have it your way.”

They want a God who is merciful, loving and kind. The God of Christianity fulfills that desire. But the God of mercy and love is also the God of judgment and damnation.

But one cannot have one without the other.

Close:

America has been great because of God. If we fall, it will be because of our failure to honor God as our Authority and Lord.

We must be willing to stand.

Ephesians 6:13

¹³ Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

We must be willing to pray.

We must be willing to obey.