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Partway through a Bible study on the prophets, one of the participants commented, “Pastor, these prophets seem full of bad news. They contain so much complaining and woes and warnings. The world they lived in seemed like such a mess, like they were walking in a great darkness. Why do we have to read them today, for our world is so much different than theirs was? I could use something really uplifting and inspirational rather than these harsh words we’ve been reading.”



That’s the way some of us may have also felt the past few weeks as we explored the world of several prophets. The harsh words of Amos from last Sunday still echo in our ears about God not enjoying the worship of the people due to the way they treated one another.

The words of the prophets reflected the culture of their day, highlighting the unfairness that many people experienced. Although we may feel their world was so much different than ours, I often think our worlds are not that far apart. They recognized the brokenness of the world and dreamed of a

better time, a time when fairness and equality would be the norm. I think that’s a vision we still long for today—fairness, equality, and justice.

While reading or listening to the news this past week, some of us may feel the world is still quite a mess. This past week newspaper and television stories have headlined sexual scandals, the potential undermining of health care, and another school shooting. As I hear and read these words about our world, I mutter to myself, “What a mess! How are we going to get through all these traumas? This week of Thanksgiving, how do I give thanks when we seem to live in so much mess? How do we hear something hopeful in the midst of so much doom and gloom?”

Hearing something hopeful is not always easy to do. Listening itself is hard, even with our friends and family members. How many times have teens yelled at their parents, “You don’t understand me,” while parents reply, “You’re not listening to me.” How many times have spouses lamented, “My spouse doesn’t seem to hear what



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I'm saying. It's as though we speak two different languages." One partner may say, "How do I get him to hear what I'm saying," while the other says, "How do I get her to say what she wants." If we have such a hard time hearing one another, how do we expect to hear God in the midst of this messy world?

That's something a young man [who] once lost his job [wondered], and growing somewhat desperate about his plight, went to see an old preacher that he knew. As he poured out his heart to the preacher he angrily declared "I've begged and begged God to say something to help me, preacher. Why doesn't God answer?"

The old preacher, who was sitting across the room, spoke a reply so quiet the young man was unable to make it out. The young man stepped across the room. "What did you say?" he asked.

The preacher repeated herself, again in a soft tone. So the young man moved closer until he was leaning on the preacher's chair.

"Sorry," he said. "I still didn't hear you." With their heads bent together, the old preacher spoke once more. "God sometimes whispers," she said, "So we will move closer to hear God."¹

That experience echoes the biblical prophet Elijah's experience when he hid in the mountains while being hunted down by those who wanted him dead. In the midst of the fear and messiness of his life, he discovered that God came to him in a whisper, in the silence of the breeze. God spoke not in thunder and lightning or a great fire, but in sheer silence, possibly to get Elijah to move closer to God.

God sometimes enters our world in quiet and surprising and unusual ways, which is what the prophet Isaiah suggested in today's scripture. Isaiah spoke during a turbulent time in the history of God's people. They had experienced the conquering of their land by neighboring nations, the abusive treatment of the poor by those with wealth, and the inept leadership of their own kings who made unwise political alliances. You might say, their world was a mess. But does it sound much different than our world today?

Into this messy situation, God whispered in Isaiah's ear about an unusual way of sending hope: through the birth of a baby.



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For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.

When Isaiah referred to the birth of a baby during his own time period, we don't know the exact identity of this child of hope. Possibly the child was Josiah, who began to reign as king at the age of eight after the assassination of his father, King Amon. The Bible describes Josiah as a very faithful king, so Isaiah may have highlighted him as the hope God's people needed.

When those in the early church centuries later recalled Isaiah's vision about the birth of a child, they heard those ancient words echo in their own time, for they recalled the birth of Jesus, born in a



manger. This child grew up and taught about God's kingdom, healed the sick, listened to the poor, and was not even stopped by death. Jesus entered into a messy world to reflect what God was doing among us.

Those in the early church struggled to understand why their world remained a mess after the coming of Jesus, and we today may still wonder the same thing. As one writer suggested:

The reality is we are living in a tension where both the broken world and the new creation exist, side by side. On the one hand, the world is still flawed, messy, imperfect. On the other hand, the world is also a new creation – made new by the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ.



The gift of Christ's coming was not a world perfected and handed over to humanity to revel in. Christ's coming ushered in the beginning of a creation where human beings are co-creators of the promised kingdom.... God did God's part

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to usher in the new creation. It is up to us to do our part to bring God's kingdom to earth.² Every time you reach out and help another person, you have heard God's whisper in your ear how to transform God's creation.

- When you bring food for the food pantry to feed a hungry family
- When you send a card or make a phone call to someone who can't make it to church
- When you visit someone in the hospital
- When you smile at a child and speak comforting words and her name
- When you welcome or invite someone to worship with us
- When you listen to the story of someone who is homeless rather than judging him

- When you celebrate that God has created people of various skin colors rather than labeling others
- When you listen to the story of someone who experiences their sexuality in a different way than you
- When you tutor someone struggling with reading or math

During this week of Thanksgiving, may we not only celebrate the blessings God has given us, but may we also continue to give thanks that God has invited us to bring hope to a messy world. For as Isaiah reminded his people: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." In the midst of our messy world, may you continue to reflect God's light.



¹ Source unknown. <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/gods-voice/>

² Narrative Lectionary Program 1 2017-18 Worship Resources Copyright © 2017 Clergy Stuff, p. 95.