

The Prophets' Stump Speech
 OT 5A-20
 Micah 6: 1-8
 Isaiah 58: 1-9a
 2/9/2020
 Rev. Rob Carter

“The Prophets’ Stump Speech”

It’s been a week, hasn’t it? Since we last gathered here, Towson Presbyterian, our nation has witnessed the conclusion of the president’s impeachment trial—ending in his acquittal but also the first-ever guilty vote of a senator against his party’s president. We witnessed a state of the union in which the president refused to shake the speaker’s hand, while the speaker tore up her copy of the president’s speech. And we witnessed a breakdown in the Iowa caucus voting system that’s now a virtual tie still as the Democratic candidates have gone on to spar with each other in New Hampshire.

We knew going in it was going to be a politically suspenseful week. And sadly, most also suspected it’d be volatile and even hostile. But in some ways this week seemed to reach even new heights.

So, I realize, there are a couple ways of looking at our current sermon series. You might think it was somewhat brave to schedule two sermons in a row on politics and stump speeches. Or you might wisely contend it was incredibly stupid.

But full disclosure. While we certainly make exceptions from time to time, our worship schedule is largely planned out about half a year or more in advance.

So when this series was first thought of, we didn’t have any idea that all of this would be happening right now. Rather, we suspected that, at this point amid a presidential election year, society would be getting inundated with the political stump speech. And, true to form, with the Democratic presidential primaries now underway, we’ve been hearing stump speech after stump speech.

So I thought, “Hey... stump speeches. Let’s explore the political stump speeches of our day as well as the prophetic sort of stump speeches we find in Scripture.”

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If only I knew then, right? Still... instead of jumping ship, which we could’ve done, I honestly think the volatility around us makes it all the more important to explore the relationship between our faith and our lives.

So once again, we dig in this week to the political stump speech—the speech designed to share a candidate’s ideas, their plans, how they’ll vote, what they’ll do if you elect or re-elect them to office. That’s what a stump speech is *supposed* to be. “Why you should vote for me.”

But as I shared last week, these speeches have largely become less and less about positing ideas and ideals plus a strategy to achieve them, and more and more about simply seeking to tear down the other side. Even flat-out insulting and demeaning them. As if that, in any way, shape, or form, is a faithful or acceptable behavior.

And I lament that. I do. Because, as I understand it at least, political stump speeches should be the basis off of which the electorate gets to see whether the people they vote into office do what they say they're going to do. Act the way they say they'll act. Or whether they simply vote and act in ways that are in the best interest of their political party and therefore their own chances of reelection.

I mean, isn't that the design of the whole darn system? As citizens, we don't have governing power. But we do have the ability to elect those who do. So we seek to vote for those who, we hope, will come closest to doing the things we think they should do.

If this is true, then it means our entire system of governance is predicated on the assumption that those we elect will serve with ... wait for it... integrity! Integrity. A word that can mean different things to different folks, so when I say integrity here, I mean its ethical definition, in which integrity is defined as "honesty and truthfulness, (and) the accuracy of one's action." Saying what you mean and then doing what you say. It's essentially the opposite of political spin.

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Of course, the easy thing to do at this point would be to point fingers at the political system and note so many obvious failures of integrity. There are more than enough to go around.

But that's not what this sermon series is about.

Rather, the hard truth is, if you ask the society around us, politics is not the only system with an integrity issue.

For as long as God has been calling prophets to speak truth to God's people, the prophets have been calling people of faith out on their lack of integrity. Granted, none of the prophets really put it in those exact words, but that's essentially the prophets' stump speech—"You're not living your faith with integrity."

It was the message of Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah. It was the message of Amos and Hosea and Micah who time and again spoke hard truths to the people of God, proclaiming, "What you say you believe and the way you live do not correlate."

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Take, for example, our two lessons this morning—one from Micah and one from Isaiah. Both prophets spoke to the people of Israel upon their return to their homeland of Judah, following years of exile in Babylon. As Scripture makes plain, life had been hard in Babylon, but what they encountered back home was, in some ways, even worse, as the people found their homes and fields had all been destroyed, and the great Jerusalem temple Solomon had built lay in ruins.

Suffice it to say, they knew life was going to be hard. They knew they had to start from scratch. So upon their reentry into their Promised Land, Israel decided to reinvest themselves in a season of worship and fasting.

Now, personally, I've never been a huge fan of fasting for ritualistic purposes, but this discipline harkens back thousands of years as not only a day for refraining from food, but a day for time spent in prayer, as well.

So upon their return home from exile, that's what Israel focused on. They worshipped and they fasted... they worshipped and they fasted. But even though they were fasting regularly, more than they used to, life still didn't seem to get any easier for them. The temple restoration was slow-plodding. Their fields were still scarred by both fire and floods. And the great society they once knew still lay in tatters, as many of their leaders had yet to return home.

We don't really know exactly how long this went on for, but in our passage today, it seems Israel had run out of patience. They cried out to God, "Why do we fast, if you don't even notice? Why should we keep humbling ourselves in prayer and worship, if nothing good seems to come from it, God? When will our fasting be enough? When will our prayers finally be answered?"

They were a people in pain crying out. They believed God was denying them justice. They believed God was letting their world spin out of control. Sure, they'd finally come home from exile, but what good was that if God had now abandoned them?

Which is a scary feeling, isn't it? That God isn't who you thought God was? Or that God doesn't seem to notice you. Or that God doesn't seem to care what you're doing? And that life as you know it is thus in doubt?

Have you ever felt like that? Perhaps when an earnest, constant prayer keeps seeming to go unanswered. Or when a loved one gives you bad news that sends you reeling. Or perhaps you question God's integrity when you look out a broken world and keep seeing more cracks than before. Or a political system that seems to be creating enemies instead of building bridges of understanding.

Why keep fasting God? Why keep worshipping? Why keep praying if you don't even seem to notice?

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Finally, in both our lessons from Micah and Isaiah this morning, God hears the people's questions, and responds through the prophets.

"Since the day I first called you, have I not told you what I ask of you? To do justice, and love kindness, and seek to walk daily with me as your guide?"

"Yet look. You fast—not for me but for yourselves. The only reason you fast is in order to try and get me to do what you want.

"But that's not what real worship is about," the prophets continued. "Worship isn't about manipulating God or others to look good or get your way. Worship is the place that should mold you. Worship is the place that should shape you. Worship is the place that should form you into God's holy people. Worship is the place you should open yourself up to what God wants for and from you, that you might be nourished with love and grace not so that you can grow fat on what God gives you, but so that you can go and give to those in need."

And then... then the prophets put it plain and simple. "If worship doesn't change *you*, then you're doing it wrong."

“So know this,” Isaiah said. “God could not care less about you fasting from food. What God seeks is a transformation of your priorities. So if you’re going to fast... fast from your greed; fast from your consumption; fast from your pride; fast from the insistence that your needs are most important; fast from the delusion the *you* are always right.

“And then... once you’ve fasted from all of this, you will see that the real measure of your worship is how well you pursue justice not for yourself, but for others. The poor. The oppressed. The rejected. The forgotten.”

Isaiah was letting them have it. He was making clear, “If you’re going to call yourselves people of faith... people of God’s love and grace, then it’s not enough to simply worship God and refrain from doing bad things. It’s not enough to say you’re a person of faith and then ask God to do what you believe needs to be done.”

People of faith are called to use their gifts to pursue God’s justice for those in need of it. For that is how the kingdom of God grows. That is how systems of justice take root. Not from looking out for one’s self... not from telling others what to do or hoping others with more resources will do the heavy lifting. No. The kingdom of justice grows when people of faith prioritize love of neighbor in a way so few in the world actually do.

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Towson Presbyterian Church, I share that one of the reasons I love being one of your pastors is because you are a community seeking to do exactly this—to live your faith with integrity. Our values of inclusion, curiosity, compassion and courage... they hold not because we already are these things, but because these are what we’re striving to become.

But that striving... let me be clear... It must never stop.

For our worship to hold any water at all, we must perpetually make room for God to challenge our assumptions and expand our horizons.

Our worship must perpetually lead us out from this space and into the streets of our town and into our city, our nation, our world in pursuit of God’s kingdom of justice that is far bigger than anyone of us.

Our worship must lead us to recognize that the change we seek is not simply going to happen with the ease of a vote or telling others what they should do, but by letting God work through us.

Which is why the integrity of our faith matters so, so much. That others would see us, TPC—people of faith—as people of action. People who authentically reflect the love and grace and justice we proclaim right here. People who find in worship and in community the catalyst for the change God yearns for us make—both within ourselves and the systems in which we live.

As the prophets proclaim time and time again, that, in the end, is the kind of integrity on which God’s justice rolls in, and God’s kingdom takes root. Amen.