

Haftarah

'Take heed, be quiet, do not fear...'



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

Isaiah 6:8

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Isaiah 6:1—7:6; 9:5-6) accompanies the Torah portion *Yitro*: Exodus 18:1—20:23.
- Both readings describe a divine revelation. The Torah portion contains God’s revelation at Mt Sinai. The Haftarah opens with Isaiah receiving a personal revelation which starts his prophetic career.

Background

- The prophet associated with this text lived in the latter half of the 8th century BCE, in the southern kingdom of Judah amidst times of political turmoil. He was familiar with the problems of idolatry and social injustices seeping into Israelite society.
- His prophecy is colored by political events: the northern kingdom of Israel (also called ‘Ephraim’) forms an alliance with Syria (also called ‘Aram’) in order to meet the aggression of Assyria (modern day Iraq). The alliance also threatens King Ahaz of Judah to whom Isaiah is sent.

Ponder

- *‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’* (6:3). A verse familiar to Catholic Mass congregations.
- *Hem* (6:1): the lower border of God’s robe, or the ‘train’ (Plaut), suggests an image of a giant God who is bigger than his own temple.
- Divine presence *‘fills’* the temple (6:1, 4) and the earth (6:3).
- *‘Woe is me’* (6:5): In the Hebrew bible to look upon God can mean death. But Isaiah is spared when the seraph touches his mouth (6:6-7).
- *‘Here am I: send me!’* (6:8). In contrast to Moses’ hesitation in accepting his prophetic calling, Isaiah responds willingly and at once.
- *‘Keep listening but do not comprehend...’* (6:9-10). The image is of a people determined not to hear God’s message. Just as Moses was sent to a hard-hearted Pharaoh, Isaiah’s message will fall on deaf ears.
- *‘How long?’* (6:11): the bible’s language of lament.
- *‘...whose stump remains standing’* (6:13). Translators are uncertain about this. Plaut relates it to the rebirth of Israel from a righteous remnant.
- *‘For a child has been born for us...’* (9:6; verse numbering may vary). The rabbis add two verses from Chapter 9 to close the Haftarah on a messianic note. Christian tradition identifies the child as Jesus. In Jewish tradition the child is Hezekiah, son of Ahaz.

Reflect

- Whether they refer to the Syro-Ephraimite War of 8th century BCE or our 21st century conflicts, prophetic voices like Isaiah’s are always relevant, challenging, consoling. Share your thoughts on this statement.

Bibliography: Harper Collins Study Bible: NRSV (NY, 1993); Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Zondervan, *Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2005). Scripture: NRSV.

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Text: Teresa Pirola. Illustration: Sarann Ryan. © The Story Source, 2012. *Haftarah* (from the Hebrew root word; ‘to conclude’) is the name given to the reading which, in accordance with the Jewish lectionary, is read after the Torah portion of the day, at Shabbat and festival services.