

**When God Steps In.** A sermon in the "The Story" series, chapter 16. Delivered by Rev. Steven Schafer on January 13, 2013. Text: Isaiah 55: 1-11.

If you are following along in "The Story" you know we are on chapter 16 today. There are 31 chapters so you are over half way through. Congratulations! "The Story" is a chronological journey through the Bible. The book titled "The Story" is actually an abbreviated version of the Bible in which the authors have taken out some of the laborious sections that scholars love but that the average Bible reader just can't slog through - the Levitical laws, the genealogies, the long historical narratives... I've been quite gratified to hear numerous of you say you have really enjoyed reading "The Story." One person actually said she almost can't wait to get to the next chapter to see what is going to happen. Has the Bible ever been that exciting or interesting to you? Maybe this is the first time in your life that you have really enjoyed reading the Bible... We still have a few copies left in the narthex. We're still in the Old Testament - some of the most unfamiliar parts so hopefully you're learning some things along the way. If you haven't been following along and would like to you can just jump in where we are and then, if you want, you can go back later to see what has come before.

We are up to about 700 B.C. today. For the past 208 years Israel has rejected their God in one way or another - they have practically forgotten their heritage and the God who brought them to where they are. 208 years! That's almost as long as America has been a nation. How much do you know about the religion of the founding fathers? It was that long for the Israelites since they had been in a solid relationship with God. So you can imagine - the current generation has pretty much left the fold - YHWH? Who's he? They have turned to idol worship. King after king have been godless pagans, one worse than the last. Society has deteriorated so much that morality and honesty and righteousness and faith have practically vanished. And, although God is about as patient as you could ask Him to be, he is not infinitely patient. They won't listen to the prophets. They won't read the scriptures. They won't deal with the sins of their lives or in society...

What do you do if you are God? What do you do when your chosen people - the people you love most on earth and who you have blessed for countless generations - abandons you - not just abandons you but spits in your face? They not only want nothing to do with you but they actively go in a different direction?...

God decides to step in and do something about it... He had already sent the prophets. Their words fell on deaf ears. He had warned them for more than two CENTURIES that disaster was coming if they didn't change their ways. Now, this is important: nearly HALF of all the prophets in the Bible lived and prophecied in this period - God was REALLY trying to get the message across - and all of them were saying essentially the same thing - "Israel, get your act together before it's too late." HALF of all the prophecies in the Bible are about this period of God's people abandoning Him so, you see, this is not some little footnote in history - "Oh yeah - that's that period when Israel was really screwing up." God took this VERY seriously. Israel had forgotten God repeatedly throughout their history but never to this extent and I wonder if God was worried that they would NEVER come back... Can you imagine hearing for as long as you've been alive - as long as your parents or grandparents or great grandparents were alive the same message - "Turn back to God before it's too late!" Apparently the Israelites were a bit like the U.S. government with its "debt ceiling" and the "fiscal cliff." You don't really take any decisive action, even with impending disaster, until the last possible minute... But eventually that "last possible minute" passes and something terrible happens. God allows the Assyrians (roughly the equivalent of modern-day Syria) to invade and conquer Israel. Now, if you remember, Israel is already a divided nation. "Israel" in the north and "Judah" in the south. After the Assyrians win the battle, the "Israel" portion of the nation is gone. The Assyrians deport and scatter the residents throughout their empire and identity and culture and any remnant of religion from Israel is absorbed into Assyrian culture - Israel is no more - creating what has been called "the lost tribes of Israel." Ten people-groups vanish into the woodwork never to be heard from again...

The prophets message had always been, "Listen - if you will turn from your evil ways - if you will repent - if you will say you're sorry - God will back off and you will be OK - - better than OK. God will BLESS you." But they didn't listen.

But God's covenant with Abraham guaranteed that His people will never completely vanish from the earth. A remnant remained in Judah and God sent the prophet Isaiah to them when he said, "Comfort, comfort my people... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD'S hand double for all her sins." (Is. 40: 1,2) It broke God's heart to see what happened to his people... his sons and daughters gone - most of them lost forever...

But, of course, that's all ancient history - literally (715 B.C.). What we want to know is what it has to do with our lives today - how does this ancient lesson touch us where we are today in 21st century America?

Two things come to mind. First: God's great love for us moves him to want to speak to us - to motivate us - to show us truth - to offer us forgiveness - to teach us - through others.

During the holidays our little grandson was in. He will be two in February so he is full of energy and full of wanting to discover and explore everything. The first evening they were in I put a fire in the fireplace and, to him, it must have been the most magical thing he had ever seen. He had never seen a fire blazing before. How beautiful. How interesting. How wonderful. Those pretty orange and yellow tongues of flame leaping up and down - dancing and having a great time. I'm pretty sure he wanted to get closer and grab one to see what it was. But what kind of a parent (or grandparent) would just sit there and let him do it? What kind of parent would say, "Oh, let him be. He needs to find out that fire is hot and not to be handled. Let him learn it the hard way. He'll learn it well." That just isn't going to happen, is it? His parents (or Sue or I) will leap to the rescue and make sure he doesn't come too near, scooping him up and holding him secure, making absolutely sure that he doesn't get burned. And if, while no one is around, he does reach in and try to grab a flame and is burned, instantly mom or dad will be there to soothe the burn and comfort the crying, hurting child.

If we, as humans, do that, how much more the God who loves us with more than human love? Whatever it is in our lives that fascinates and draws us - whatever it is that will burn us or injure us or cause us pain- our heavenly Father wants to protect us from. God doesn't just sit up there in heaven watching as we go astray. He does all he can to make sure we are safe and secure. Now, God doesn't usually step in and, with a loud voice, say, "**Hey. Don't touch that, you'll get burned - don't do that, it will harm you.**" Rather, he sends people into our lives with those messages. God sends people into our lives to speak words of warning, words of caution, words of comfort, words of hope.

You see, God doesn't want us to fall into the fire. He would hate that. The prophet Ezekiel, speaking for God, says, "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" God raises up voices to speak to our hearts His truth. Maybe it's the voice of a friend or your cousin or your spouse or your minister - or even the voice in your mind as you read "The Story." God is striving to communicate to you and me when we are headed into trouble. Maybe, when reading "The Story" we ought to think of it as more than ancient history and say to God, "God, what are you trying to say to me? What dangers are you trying to warn me away from? What am I doing that will harm my life or my reputation or my relationship with you or my family? Please - help me to listen as you speak..."

And that is, of course, the second point: Listen. Don't be hard hearted.

One of the images that the Bible gives of the prophet is as a watchman on a tower. His job is to forth tell the truth. But if people don't listen, the prophet has discharged his duty and is not accountable for whatever happens. The role of God's messengers is just to speak to the people what God has revealed to them... Listen. When God brings a prophet into your life - someone who cares about you, who wants the best for you, who follows God, listen to that person's wisdom and don't just shrug it off. Israel did to their own disaster...

I'm sure you are like me in this: We don't like someone telling us what to do - especially if they tell us we are doing something wrong. We resent it. It hurts - especially if we know they are right. But when we reject those kinds of messages we may be rejecting a message from God... Now, I'm not saying every criticism that comes our way is from God. It isn't. But I am saying we need to consider it. Was the message given in love? Was it said in the way Jesus would say it? Is it true? Listen when God speaks and your life will be enriched... God brings prophets into your life to make it better - brings wise and caring people to you who mostly unknowingly speak His words.

On the other side of the coin, sometimes our role is to be the prophet. Sometimes WE need to speak out. When we see someone - a friend - a co-worker - a family member - involved in some self-destructive activity, we may be called to

become God's prophet. We ALWAYS speak humbly and in love. We NEVER want to give offense. We NEVER want to seem judgmental or harsh, but it is sometimes up to us to speak the truth in love that that person can be redeemed from the throes of disaster or heartbreak or trouble... That person may not listen to you. They may go their own way and perhaps even resent God's words spoken through your mouth, but the prophet's job is to tell the truth, not to manipulate the hearer nor to be responsible for his or her actions...

Don't mis-hear what I just said. I know people who LOVE to "straighten out" others - who claim they simply "tell it like it is." I don't think those people are God's messengers. When God calls you or me to be prophets in someone's life He calls us to be the gentlest, most loving, most compassionate, most hesitant people on earth - people who care and have sought God's guidance and then speak as our Heavenly Father would speak.

So -

- Know God loves you.
- Listen to the prophets he sends into your life. They will make your life so much better.
- Be ready to be a prophet yourself as God shows you His truth and be that prophet with a loving and Christ-like spirit.

Israel didn't listen. God was patient for two centuries but HAD to call them on their sin. And it hurt. When we sin may God send a prophet to call us to repentance and renewal of the relationship He so longs for... Let us thank Him for loving us so much...