

Isaiah 6: 1-13: "May the Words of My Mouth"

Matt Gaventa, June 3, 2012

*"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I come from a people of unclean lips."* Last week I read in the *Wall Street Journal* the results of a new study by a Duke professor of behavioral economics: apparently, and with great statistical regularity, we lie. Almost all of us. Basically whenever we can get away with it. The researchers put groups of people in a room to solve a series of math problems, and then paid them some slight amount based how many they had claimed to have completed. When subjects were asked to turn in their work, they reported, for the most part, honestly. But when subjects reported simply on an honor system, leaving their actual work in the shredder, the average score skyrocketed. There's no escaping the conclusion: we lie.

It's the little ways, really. Almost nobody claimed to have finished 100% of the questions. But they all rounded up, just a little bit, a point or two for personal advantage. So we lie. Even I, *I am a man of unclean lips*. Yes, the story was in the *Wall Street Journal*, and I suppose that's technically where I read it, but the way I said it made it sound like I was the sort of person who routinely scours the *Journal* for cultural tidbits, and I like the way that makes me sound. And if I were a bit more inclined to honesty... well, fine, I just found the story posted on Facebook... what can I say? We are a people of unclean lips. We lie.

Lest this sounds surprising – lest we think that lying is reserved for the actions of a certain kind of scoundrel, Bernie Madoff, or Barry Bonds, or pick your scandalized public celebrity – lest this sound surprising, Isaiah is here to remind us of how ingrained our lying habits are. We have today the story of Isaiah's call to prophesy: a story of a vision given of the whole Heavenly court, of fire and smoke filling the temple, of angels and seraphim singing praises to God: Holy, Holy, Holy, which in Hebrew is very much like saying "Clean, Clean, Clean" – Jewish theology so closely associates the two concepts – and with this vision before him Isaiah does not join in the adulation, or burst into song, or make petition before his Creator; with the gift of the vision of God given to him, with the honor of being in the presence of the Almighty, Isaiah falls to his knees: *"Woe is me. I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I come from a people of unclean lips, but my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!"* The *Journal* story says that one of the limits to our lying is that "we want to view ourselves as honest, honorable people," but face-to-face with the Divine, Isaiah has no such intent. Face-to-face with real light, Isaiah finally sees the darkness of his own human heart. Face-to-face with real truth, Isaiah has no choice but to announce his confession: I am a man of unclean lips. We lie.

Now I have to admit that, personally, I am very sympathetic to liars, and not just because I am one. No, I am very sympathetic to liars, as I suspect many of us are, because I am a child of an age in which truth itself always comes with a possessive pronoun. My truth. Your truth. Our truth(s). I am a child of an age in which lying is relative, based on whose truth we choose. If you don't believe that, let's talk again in September, once the election cycle really kicks into its highest gear. Watch a few cable news roundtables. Hang out on Facebook during a presidential debate. Consider carefully whether truth can even legitimately be found by measuring for the midpoint between two rhetorical positions. Surely the greatest sign of the state of our disunion is that the very idea of truth now lies in the bottom bin of the bargain-basement, a sparkle in the eye only of conspiracy enthusiasts and wandering preachers, or worse, simply an after-the-fact veneer, applied with broadest strokes and limitless gusto to whatever factional opinion or zeitgeist we choose to follow. Stephen Colbert would call it "truthiness." Apparently we needed a liberal stand-up comic masquerading as a conservative talk show pundit to explain to us just how twisted we had become.

But is this not the wise cynicism of the age: that we've just given up on truth, that everybody lies, and that nobody should be surprised? The *Journal* article reported that about 1% of people were at both extremes: with 98% of us in the middle, about 1% would lie almost without fail, without regard for the likelihood of being caught. The other 1% would tell the truth, no matter what, without regard for personal gain. And I think we've lost track of which 1% are the psychopaths. Because in a culture where everybody lies, for a people of unclean lips, truth can be whatever we want it to be, a production, a pageant, a quantity of decibels, shadow-play and theatre wielded only to our advantage, a lie mutually agreed upon.

Of course the odd fact does occasionally creep in. But in a culture so resolutely opposed to actual truth, facts become the enemy. This past week state lawmakers in North Carolina began to circulate House Bill 819, which, among other things, would bind the state to plan for rising ocean levels based only on preexisting projections. In other words, if this legislation were to pass, sea levels in the Outer Banks would only be allowed to rise at precisely the rate that the state already expects them to rise; actual measurements to the contrary would be inadmissible. Think about that for a second. Ocean levels are rising on a curve, not a straight line. In North Carolina's low-lying coastal areas, that curve is so threatening that the state is considering, for all intents and purposes, outlawing it. We have the capacity to measure! We have the capacity to know! These are measurable, knowable, observable, verifiable facts, and their brute inconvenience may make them criminal. For a people of such willfully unclean lips, what hope can truth possibly have? What power can it possibly wield if it cannot escape the din of our sound and our fury?

And it gets worse. This is Isaiah's commencement address: he's off to be a court prophet, which means that his vocational identity is tied to his ability to speak truth to a people of unclean lips, to speak truth to the leaders of a world where truth has lost its way. New graduates go off to any number of bad entry-level jobs but this one is exceptionally fraught. He's called to speak truth about God, to speak the Word of the Lord, to speak about and for and with the Almighty with nothing but unclean lips. Frankly, it's easier for us. We get to go home from here, back to our cynicism, back to our Facebook feeds; we'll go from this place back to the truths we have chosen for ourselves. But Isaiah's got it bad. No wonder it burns. I mean that literally: no wonder it burns. No wonder the seraph brings a hot live coal from the altar and touches it to Isaiah's lips; the seraph can't even touch it without a pair of tongs – but Isaiah gets it, right on the mouth. I imagine that would leave a mark. Isaiah is called to brutal, impossible, thankless labor. I imagine he would feel terribly alone, maybe except for that mark on his mouth. I imagine it would all feel impossible, maybe except for that burn mark on his mouth, the place where the angel of God had made him clean, where God had given him the power to speak, had given him the power of truth, had given him the lasting reminder: "You were there, Isaiah. You were there. You have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts. You were there. You have seen what truth looks like."

Okay, I lied again, a few minutes ago, I'm sorry. Actually, it's not easy for us, and we don't get to go home unchanged. Everybody lies, and yet. Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost, when the flames of the Holy Spirit came and marked the first disciples of the risen Christ, when they too were called to speak and to hear. To those first disciples as to Isaiah, the flames of the Spirit marked them with that lasting reminder: "We were there. We have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts. We have seen the way, the truth, the life." And as children of that Pentecost our challenge is not simply to tell the truth – no, such a call is far too simple, for history is littered with examples of telling truth in the service of a great lie, or occasions for lying in the service of a greater truth – no, our challenge as Pentecost people is far more demanding: we have inherited the mark of the flames, the lasting reminder that we, too, were there, and that we, too, have a call to prophecy. *This* Sunday, this Trinity Sunday, we whom God has called into

being, we who have seen the King made flesh, we who were there by the power of the Holy Spirit: with every organ of our bodies we are now witnesses.

This is what we pray: *Lord, give us eyes to see, that we might look at our own cities, our own country, our own families, that we might look ourselves in the mirror and see truly as you see.* This is what we pray: *Lord, set our hands and feet to your purpose, that we might work for peace and justice and reconciliation and truth.* This is what we pray, the Psalmist's prayer, the preacher's prayer: *Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight.* So to speak with truth is to speak with prayer, to speak with the faith that God can use our words, that God can tune our hearts, that when we speak faithfully, in our cities and in our country, when we speak faithfully to one another, that God is there, speaking truth. That when we speak faithfully, in our relationships, with friends and family, with those people in our lives separated from us by the barrier of our unclean lips, that as we speak faithfully, God is there, speaking truth. And that in this place. In this place, when we gather in worship and in fellowship, when we gather at this table, when we gather to join our lips in song and in prayer – *my the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts* – even as we are honest about our lies let us be steadfast in our faithfulness, for God is steadfast and faithful and here, speaking truth, and if we would seek it, first, and finally, and faithfully, we would *listen*.

This is the good news: God is here, speaking. "Here I am, send me,!" says Isaiah, and God says "Alright, listen carefully." God is here, speaking, and if we would find our way through the land of unclean lips, if we would seek truth, first, finally, faithfully, we would *listen*.

In the winter of '98, as South Africa was still mending the most gaping wounds of Apartheid, its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, headed by Archbishop Tutu, was powerfully divided. The TRC was created to determine the true history of segregation and thus pave the way to healing, but it was helplessly stuck over the issue of whether to pardon a particular slate of ANC members. Tutu led the group on a three-day retreat to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned for so many years. After one day of wandering through the living history, the group was ready for the inevitable slog of negotiation and unhappy compromise. But the morning of the second day, Tutu had other plans: "Today," he said, "is to be a day of silence. Today we have to become so quiet that we can hear the Lord speak."

So directed, the group dispersed: some to sit by the lapping waves, some to sit among the historic ruins. At sunset they reconvened, and shared their testimony: "The Lord made me realize how closely knit we have become!" "The Lord made me aware of the thousands of people praying for us." And one woman in a soft voice began to sing, "*Were you there when they crucified my Lord.*" Tutu said a prayer and sent the evening on its way. And on the morning of the last day, with the boat leaving in just a short time, when finally they sat at table with the critical issue before them, in less than half an hour, they were unanimous. For a people of unclean lips, for a people in search of a powerful and healing truth, they had first to open their hearts and listen.

So too for us. We with unclean lips. We a church of unclean lips. We a city of unclean lips. We a country of unclean lips. We whose lies echo with sound and fury in every corner of our lives. We who would know the truth. We who have seen the King. We who were there. We have to become so quiet that we can hear the Lord speak. We have to become so quiet...

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord...*