



The dereliction of duty: of watchmen, sheepdogs, and shepherds

Isaiah 56.10-12

text

Following is the text for today's homily, as translated by the King James Bible translators. As we examine the text, I will offer a more free-flowing translation that is, I like to think, still faithful to Isaiah's message.

His watchmen are blind:

they are all ignorant,

they are all dumb dogs,

they cannot bark;

sleeping, lying down,

loving to slumber.

Yea, they are greedy dogs

which can never have enough,

and they are shepherds that cannot understand:

they all look to their own way,

every one for his gain, from his quarter.

"Come ye," say they, "I will fetch wine,

and we will fill ourselves with strong drink;

and to morrow shall be as this day,

and much more abundant.

In this text, Isaiah lampoons Judah's leaders, political and religious. We will, as one would expect in a homily, explore why Isaiah subjects the political and religious leaders of his day to ridicule and criticism. What is it about them that he finds so ludicrous and profane? But, unlike the past, when we might have left the reader to draw his or her own applications, we will—consistent with our post-2016 election “revelation” that the day for soft spoken, cautious, inconclusive, and diplomatic exegesis is over—go beyond textual and historical examination, making direct application to America's political and religious leaders—tragically, all too closely imitative of those of ancient Judah.

Triple whammy

In offering his criticism of Judah's political and religious leaders, Isaiah engages in the shunned literary practice of mixing metaphors. Isaiah likens Judah's political and religious leaders to “watchmen,” “sheepdogs,” and “shepherds.” While the metaphors are mixed, the metaphors have much in common. Let us ask first, then, “What does a watchman, a sheepdog, and a shepherd have in common?”

All provide a basic service.

The watchman is a “public servant.” He keeps watch against the approach of danger, acting as a kind of early warning system. He ought to be alert. He ought to have the sort of knowledge that allows him to correctly identify danger. He ought to have the willingness and know-how to communicate the existence and nature of the danger in such a way that the public understands and acts upon his warning so as to keep safe of the danger.

The “sheepdog” is also a “servant.” He serves the sheep and the shepherd. He, too, watches for dangers. He must know where and how to position himself in relation to the sheep so as to see any approaching danger. He must know a ravaging wolf from a wandering dog or a straying lamb. He must know how to issue a warning when a carnivore is present or a lamb wanders from the safety of the fold.

Finally, the “shepherd” is “servant” to the flock. He must know and do all he can to advance the safety and successful productivity and increase of the flock. He must be dedicated to the flock’s safety. The true shepherd will put the flock above himself.

As watchmen, sheep dogs, and shepherds, how do Judah’s religious and political leaders stack up against these basic job descriptions? Not well. In fact, not at all. They are in no way qualified for the work to which they have been called—or have hijacked for themselves. On the rare occasion when there might be minimal qualification, there is a complete absence of willingness to fulfil the obligations associated with one who watches. Let’s have a look at Isaiah’s specific claims about the ineptitude and rebelliousness of Judah’s political and religious leaders.

First, we learn that

“Those assigned to be on the look-out are blind.”¹

!!!

What good is a sightless lookout? Though danger may be everywhere—surrounding, even, the blind lookout—he is incapable of seeing it. But the blindness is not to be found only in the eyes. Isaiah charges that the blindness is also to be found in the mind.

“Every last one of them are without understanding.”

These watchmen are ignorant. Even if they could see an approaching danger, they wouldn’t know what they were looking at. They wouldn’t know danger if it bit them in the butt! They are incapable of telling the difference between friend or foe, good or evil.

What a silly public, assigning, accepting, and supporting one as watchman who cannot see or discern a danger from a benefit, good from evil.

But Judah’s vulnerability is even more serious yet. We have just scratched the surface of Jewish leaders’ flaws. They are more than sightless and inept. They are willful in their dereliction of duty. To drive this home, Isaiah shifts metaphors. He leaves the metaphor of the watchman behind and trades it in for one involving a “sheepdog.” However, we must

¹ The following lines of Isaiah’s passage found below, and in italics, represent the author’s translation.

remember that Isaiah is still speaking about Judah's political and religious leaders.

*“All of them are mute watch-dogs,
incapable of barking.”*

Even if they could see and discern the danger, they cannot or will not communicate it. Wolves approach the flock, but the watchdogs remain mute. We might imagine that their muteness flows from cowardice. They are, themselves, perhaps afraid of getting eaten by the big bad wolf. But Isaiah has other explanations for their willful dereliction of duty. First,

*“Dreaming in their sleep,
they prefer snoozing (to wakefulness).”*

We might chalk their slumbering up to laziness. But there is something else at play here; something far more sinister. They are simply unconcerned about the safety of their charges. They are more concerned about their own comfort. Then again, there might be a bit of escapism taking place here. Though inadequately seen and understood, the dangers are intimidating and disquieting. To announce them requires a level of self-sacrifice that the dogs are not willing to suffer. Fantasy is to be preferred over reality, lies preferable to truth, self-delusion preferred over illumination.

And yet, in spite of their inability and unwillingness to raise the warning cry, the dogs are guilty of yet deeper transgression against their trusts.

*“Dogs, with powerful appetites,
they are never satisfied.”*

When they are not sleeping on the job, they are eating on the job. What do they eat? The sheep dogs, assigned to protect the sheep from being eaten, are, most likely, eating sheep! One thinks of Micah's—a contemporary of Isaiah—critique of Judah's leaders.

And I said,
Hear, I pray you, O heads of Jacob,
and ye princes of the house of Israel;
Is it not for you to know judgment?
Who hate the good, and love the evil;

who pluck off their skin from off them,
and their flesh from off their bones;
Who also eat the flesh of my people,
and flay their skin from off them;
and they break their bones,
and chop them in pieces, as for the pot,
and as flesh within the caldron.”²

Micah’s imagery of Judah’s religious and political leaders as cannibals; flaying, cooking and gorging themselves upon the flesh of the people whom they were called to serve, makes Isaiah’s criticism look tame by comparison.

We have already surmised that Judah’s political and religious leaders, whether represented by the watchman or the watchdog, were less concerned with those that they were called to protect than with themselves and their own comfort. But, Isaiah does not long allow our surmising to be in doubt. With his third shift in metaphor, that of the shepherd, Isaiah confirms what we previously surmised.

*“They are shepherds who know nothing,
all of them only consider themselves.
They mind only their own interests.
Each, ultimately, turns to obtaining gain by unjust means.”*

Watchman, sheepdog, and shepherd, alike, care little or nothing about their charges. They only accept the position out of consideration for their own desires and interests. Their acceptance is only a personal power play. It puts them in a position that they can pervert societal norms so as to obtain personal gain, power, and prestige even though it means cannibalizing the body politic.

So far, Isaiah has used his own words to describe the depth of Judah’s leaders’ betrayal. But Isaiah, the ever observant critic of society, has been listening to these leaders. As Jeremiah so often does, Isaiah brings their own words forward to stand as witness against them.

² Micah 3. ¹⁻³

*“I will become a collector of fine wine,
and get drunk on the strongest of beers.
Each day will be like the proceeding,
or even better.”*

Now, the LDS reader is conditioned to immediately think, “‘Word of Wisdom:’ they are being accused of breaking the Word of Wisdom.”

This tendency causes the reader to misunderstand Isaiah’s criticism, and miss about ninety-five percent of Isaiah’s discomfort with Judah’s leaders. The quotation serves to confirm all that Isaiah has said about Judah’s leaders. They are in it for themselves. Here, they hope to become well enough off that they can acquire a fine collection of wines—even today, a symbol of economic privilege and excess.³ But, we must not get hung up on the alcohol. The alcohol is simply a “stand in” for materialistic privilege and excess. These shepherds are motivated by the acquisition of wealth, which, they believe, will bring ease. And they intend to get gain by any means possible. Not “means” is too foul; no “means” out of bounds. In all of this, we might think of wicked King Noah and his priests who get fat and rich off plundering their own people.

“[Noah] placed his heart upon his riches, and he spent his time in riotous living with his wives and his concubines; and so did also his priests spend their time with harlots. He planted vineyards round about in the land; and he built wine-presses, and made wine in abundance; and therefore he became a wine-bibber, and also his people.”⁴

Each day will be a party. The pesky cares of the world that haunt so many of their “subjects” lives are not allowed to intrude into their own privileged lives. Isaiah elsewhere surveys the privileged life Judah’s leaders live.

*“But they also have erred through wine,
and through strong drink are out of the way;*

³ Google “Koch brothers and wine collection” sometime, if you want to see it in its most extreme and perverted form.

⁴ Mosiah 11.¹⁴⁻¹⁵

the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink,
they are swallowed up of wine,
they are out of the way through strong drink;
they err in vision,
they stumble in judgment.

⁸For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness,
so that there is no place clean.”⁵

Again, the “wine,” and the “drunkenness” are far more than literal. They are metaphor for an appetite that is insatiably drive to consume, even at the expense of everyone around them. These deviant leaders do not simply “err” due to physical drunkenness, but through all the privilege their immoral and unethical conduct procures for them. The “banquet tables” that are “covered in vomit” inform us just how much they have acquired. Such parties are not cheep. And they are more for show than for “refreshment.”

Not only is the public a mere tool that the leaders use and manipulate for their own ends, but they expect no negative consequences to follow:

*“Each day will be like the proceeding,
or even better.”*

History suggests that they are right, at least in the short term. How often the wealthy live out lives of ease, while the poor suffer. The Psalmist is not unreasonably confused by such injustice.

For I was envious at the foolish,
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For there are no bands in their death:
but their strength is firm.
They are not in trouble as other men;
neither are they plagued like other men.
Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain;
violence covereth them as a garment.

⁵ Isaiah 28.⁷⁻⁸

Their eyes stand out with fatness:
they have more than heart could wish.
They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression:
they speak loftily.
They set their mouth against the heavens,
and their tongue walketh through the earth....

Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world;
they increase in riches.”⁶

God does tend to be “slow to anger,” and the populace, easily intimidated, stupefied by propaganda, or bought off with trinkets. Perhaps, too, they, like the watchers, prefer fable to reality.

The more things change, the more they stay the same

Well, now, that was a fun little romp through history. But we now come to that point when we must ask the essential questions. What would Isaiah say today about America’s political and religious leaders? What kind of watchmen, sheepdogs, and shepherds have they been? What kind of watchmen, sheepdogs, and shepherds are they currently?

It is part of the corporate folklore that some years back LDS church leaders asked the seminaries and institutes of religion administrators what—given that so many young men, seminary graduates, were not serving missions, and so many young men and young women, seminary graduates, were not being married in the temple—what were they so ineffectively teaching the youth of the church? It may be just that, folklore.

I am no folklorist, but I do wonder. Today, the United States is led by, likely, the most immoral, unethical, and downright wicked man ever to be called “president.” I have consistently identified him as Caligula, the infidel. I do not do so lightly, or with tongue in cheek. I am deadly serious. So, I wonder if those same church leaders are now asking

⁶ Psalm 73.^{3-10, 12}

themselves another question. What—given that 80% of “evangelical Christians” and 70% of Mormons voted for the devilish man, while they continue to support him in embarrassingly high numbers, with Mormons leading the charge—what the hell have we watchmen been teaching our people? How could the sheep have wandered so far from the flock of Christ? How did the doctrines we have so consistently taught, not keep them from becoming followers of Caligula, an evil and delusional man? What does the flock’s descent into the darkness of this man suggest about the doctrine that has been taught? What were we looking for from the perch of our watchtower? How did we miss the approaching assault for which he stands?

Caligula’s initial election, made possible largely through “Christian” electoral support; and his continuing assault on all that is good and holy, through the continued support that “Christians” so enthusiastically offer him, suggests, in my humble view, that today’s American watchmen of all stripes, religious and political, have not acted altogether differently than those of ancient Judah. If Isaiah were around today, he would have much the same critique of modern political and religious leaders that he had for those of his day. They have, and continue to be, ignorant and mute when it comes to identifying and clearly articulating the real dangers that face the ever-vulnerable sheep—sheep seemingly ever ready to self-inflict pain and suffer. The watchmen have not known what to look for. Too often, they have been distracted by mirages. If they have seen danger, they could not identify it as such. If they have seen and identified the dangers, they have willfully and selfishly remained mute.

Too many political and religious leaders have, for most of my life, been almost universally mute concerning the dangers that the occasional, lone, brave, and isolated—and, always much maligned—watchman has issued. For example, in his so called “malaise speech,” President Jimmy Carter, offered a warning voice. In words written after weeks of self-exile, scripture study, and prayer—words that seem now prophetic—he offered, for example, the following critique of American society.

“In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities and our faith in God, too many of us now worship self-indulgence and consumption.”

Of course, he was dead on, if, still, too kind. The cancer of idolatry has run rampantly, and ruinously, through the American body. Yet, those such as the venerable and unholy Ronald

Reagan, champion of idolatry, lampooned him for such holiness. Thus do the ungodly always stone the truth-telling prophets.

Unforgivably, nearly all religious leaders have, to this day, remained mute about the silent and inevitable killer that idolatrous materialism represents—both to the individuals and the society at large. Some of them have gone even further, trading their mutism for loud proclamations that embraced the cancerous “prosperity gospel.” Pure gobbledygook it is: “personal material wealth flows from righteousness.”

For their part, political leaders have nourished the cancerous growth with a steady flow of apostate doctrine masquerading as enlightened and “scientific” economic theory and policy—false prophets such as Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand among their champions. The all-powerful and all-wise economic and corporate world enthusiastically swallows such convenient theories as “scientific,” while skeptically and conveniently questioning other much more solidly scientific theories, such as global warming. Go figure.

Like the compromised watchmen of ancient Judah, there are many reasons that might explain the modern political and religious leaders’ dereliction of duty—the duty to warn, rather than coddle the straying flock. Isaiah’s list of reasons for their neglect is applicable today. But it is his finale that seems most pertinent: the political and religious leaders, along with their organizations and institutions, have personally profited too much to put their golden calves at risk. Better not offend their sugar mamas and sugar daddys—see, I can mix metaphors as well as the next.

Having taught religion courses to thousands of students over a 30 year career, I stand condemned with my fellow religious leaders for past dereliction of duty. The stats make the conclusion painfully likely that seventy percent of those I taught support an infidel. Did they not hear a word I said? How could they so thoroughly blaspheme the name of God?

I have seen it coming for years. The idolatry has been completely out of control for some time now. Yet, I remained oh so careful, oh so polite in any discussion of it—so polite that the message, it was clear at the time and even clearer now, did not get through. Why did I only issue vague and properly diplomatic warnings? I had my reasons, of course. Some of them might have been well-intentioned. But others, I confess, involved a cowardly desire for

self-preservation. I didn't want to get in trouble. Yet, I should have been clearer and more forceful, more direct and even "confrontational."

Be that as it may, I have, as I expressed in my initial post-2016 election homilies, and from time to time since, seen the error of my ways. I repented. No more parables. No more still small voices. I have exchanged these for straight talk with a shout. The people, as I have said before, can no longer hear still, small voices. It is as though the muteness of their leaders has caused the flock's hearing to fail. Or, perhaps, the materialism of their daily lives dampens all other sound. Whatever the cause of the deafness, I now speak with the voice of a clear, loud trumpet, rather than the sound of a delicate flute.

Unfortunately, neither group, political or religious leaders, shows any signs of having learned from their past mistakes. Just as they have been mute about the dangers of idolatrous materialism and the society-destroying economic inequality, even now, today, when the danger that Caligula poses is as clear as clear can be, the watchers remain largely mute in the most cowardly fashion. When they do speak, it is too often with the same old failed diplomacy—at or just barely above whisper level. Their whispered warnings, emanating from the high perch of their watchtower, does not have a chance of carrying down to the people below.

Just look at the "dumb dogs"! By nearly all accounts, even those of his party know full well the danger Caligula poses to all that we hold dear. Such views are frequently, but privately expressed. They know he is not to be trusted. They know he is the very definition of "liar."

In seeing him kidnap children from loving parents, they offer the mildest expressions of "discomfort," being sure not to mention his name, lest they poke the angry orange beast.

They hear him defend the tyrant, Putin, and attack his own intelligence communities, and then accept his ludicrous "double negative" explanation. As if he even knows what a "double negative is"! Then, brave souls that they are, these members of an equal branch of government offer up token and non-binding resolutions.

They learn with alarm that, having met with that same tyrant in private, no one in his administration—a full week... two weeks later!—knows the first thing about what was discussed or what deals were made? Talk about a dictatorship! Yet, they offer nothing but

expressions of “concern.”

They refuse to pass legislation that would keep him from pulling a Nixonian type purge of those who investigate his highly questionable, and possibly treasonous relationship with Russia while they pretend to believe the liar when he says he has no intention of moving against them.

They receive his racism with the mildest of reactions, as if it were but a minor character flaw that is to be expected in a white 70 year-old man. Wink, wink.

They listen to him attack the freedom-maintaining press, and offer a shake of the head, a wry smile, and a “tisk, tisk.”

They see a man-who-would-be-dictator flaunting every democratic norm, and then fall in lock-step, afraid of the beast and the hordes who adore Caligula’s sacrilege.

Well, we could go on. We could go on, and on, and on, and on. We could fill dozens of pages, as we have done in our “Mad State of Rebellion” posts, with Caligula’s undemocratic and potentially treasonous behavior—if not against nation, certainly against God. Identifying the evils that flow from this narcissistic, egomaniacal, and sociopathic man isn’t rocket science, but simple common sense. It doesn’t require revelatory powers, just basic decency. Yet, too many of our religious and political leaders possess no such common sense or basic decency.

But, in mentioning “the hordes who adore his blasphemy,” we finally come to the heart of the matter. Caligula would not now be emperor if not for them. Having not properly warned them beforehand, America’s religious and political leaders now are reaping what they have so wickedly sown. At the same time, they grovel in fear before the flock that they have been called to lead. Why, they have been exposed as nothing more than abject followers of the mob. No leaders at all, these blind, mute, ignorant, and self-serving watchmen. The watchmen, dumb dogs that they are, go mute to save their own skin, even as the sheep commit suicide by flaying, barbeque, and consumption by the unrestrained and corrupt legal, political, religious, and economy institutions so greedy for wealth and power and prestige.

But, God will not be mocked.

Yes, as we have concluded so often on the pages of this site, the people have the only kind of leaders that they will stomach. As the one-term president, Jimmy Carter, discovered so many years ago, they will not receive correction. They will not hear of repentance. Rather, as Micah so tragically observes, and Caligula so effectively demonstrates,

“If a liar and deceiver comes and says,
‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,’
that would be just the prophet for this people!”

Carter’s successor, Ronald Reagan was just such a false prophet. Now, Caligula offers them the same idol that a president of the other party, Bill Clinton, did twenty years ago: “It’s the economy, stupid.” And so, in Caligula, they have found their beloved prophet of Profit, the only God they truly love.

“Well did Esaias prophesy of [them], saying,
‘This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth,
and honoureth me with *their* lips;
but their heart is far from me.
But in vain they do worship me,
teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.’”⁷

At least America’s political and religious leaders are able to accurately discern at least this much: one must simply, only, and always tell the people what they want to hear.

⁷ Matthew 15.⁷⁻⁹