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B420 Isaiah – Essay 3

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Interrupting the Social Imaginary: Naming Suffering through Isaiah and Contemporary Witnesses

Throughout this semester in B420 Isaiah, one of the most transformative insights I've gained is the necessity of naming suffering as the first step toward interrupting it. As Dr. Nancy Pineda-Madrid asserts, "In the process of naming the experience of suffering, one may understand the experience more transparently. One may identify what the experience of suffering means, namely, what is important about the experience" (Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 22). Without naming, we are unable to fully see or confront the forces that perpetuate suffering. Naming creates space for deeper engagement—an opportunity to understand suffering not only as individual but also as communal, interconnected with social, political, and economic realities.

This imperative to name suffering echoes throughout the course, particularly as we explored the concept of a "social suffering hermeneutic." Dr. Pineda-Madrid describes this as a way to "map" the intersection between personal pain and broader societal structures (Pineda-Madrid, 23). This hermeneutic became especially poignant when watching the testimony of Ernestina Enríquez Fierro, who could not even name her grief after losing a child (Fierro, 2020). Similarly, the documentary *Shut Up and Paint* by Titus Kaphar and Alex Malis illustrates how individual artistic struggle reveals systemic injustices when examined through this lens (Kaphar and Malis, 2022). These works demonstrate that by naming suffering, we can begin to challenge the social imaginaries that sustain it.

This approach also reshaped how I read the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah 5:8–23, for example, presents a series of "woes"—warnings to a society separated from God through greed, indulgence, and injustice. D.N. Praimnath's social reading of the eighth-century prophets introduces the concept of *latifundialization*—the accumulation of land by the elite at the expense of the peasantry. He writes, "The net result of land accumulation is the steady worsening plight of the peasantry, which is directly related to the loss of easy and secure access to arable land" (Premnath, 1). Isaiah's critique aligns with this dynamic, condemning a system that hoards resources and isolates wealth. Verses 8–10, for instance, describe large estates devoid of laborers, while verses 11 and 13 depict indulgent elites whose detachment from reality leads to collective suffering. Isaiah's intention is clear: to disturb complacency, to name injustice, and to reorient the people toward righteousness.

Isaiah 1:21–23 offers another incisive critique. The city once faithful is now described as a prostitute, symbolizing betrayal and moral decay. Dr. Hyun Chul Paul Kim unpacks the sexual and economic imagery here, pointing out how Isaiah uses metaphors of unfaithfulness to describe societal collapse (Kim, 35). Riches become worthless, wine is diluted, and princes no longer act as righteous heirs. Instead, they succumb to bribery and injustice. The abandonment of the orphan and widow serves as a litmus test for the community's spiritual failure. Isaiah exposes a decaying ecosystem—political, economic, and religious systems interwoven in their corruption. Once again, naming this decay is the prophet's way of urging transformation.

This class has invited me not just to observe suffering, but to recognize my own role within systems of harm. A simple exercise—pausing to engage my senses—became a profound moment of awakening. I initially dismissed it, assuming I already knew my surroundings. But by intentionally observing, I noticed the lingering scent of cleaning supplies—something previously unacknowledged. This experience challenged me to extend this awareness into my daily life. For instance, when I drive across town for groceries, how do my choices affect local businesses in my own community? How do my consumer habits support or undermine environmental and economic justice? Even the irony of driving to the gym, rather than walking or biking, reflects a personal participation in broader systems that value convenience over community care.

In this way, B420 Isaiah has moved beyond academic study; it has become a life practice. The prophet Isaiah doesn't just call for lamentation—he calls for interruption. And I, too, feel called to become an interrupter of injustice. By naming suffering, both around me and within me, I open myself to transformation. This is the gift of Isaiah—a prophetic voice urging us to see, to speak, and to act.

Bibliography

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