

Isaiah 1:1 and 10-20

¹ *The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah...* ¹⁰ *Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!* ¹¹ *What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats.*

¹² *When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more!* ¹³ *Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation — I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.* ¹⁴ *Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.* ¹⁵ *When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.*

¹⁶ *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil;* ¹⁷ *learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.* ¹⁸ *Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: If your sins are like scarlet, will they become like snow? If they are red like crimson, will they become like wool?* ¹⁹ *If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land,* ²⁰ *but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*



This morning we turn to the prophet Isaiah. He was a contemporary of the last couple of week's prophet, Hosea. Operating in the 8th century BC, Isaiah generally dealt with the disobedience of the Israelites and spoke of the

consequences for said misbehavior. Whereas Hosea dealt with this in a relatively small and personal way, using his marriage to a harlot as a foil to God's relationship with the people, Isaiah dealt with the much broader topic of Israel's choice to preach one thing and practice an entirely different thing. This indictment was mostly aimed at the ruling groups, priests and political leaders alike. Isaiah pointed to the gulf between preaching and practice. While our text comes from almost 3,000 years ago, as has been the case ever since it was written, the themes and concerns expressed in Isaiah very much apply to us today – both individually and as a church. As we prepare to walk for a few minutes with God and the prophet Isaiah, let us begin with a word of prayer...

“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” Isaiah wastes no time letting both the rulers and the people know what God thinks of them. The evil runs throughout – from top to bottom. Rulers of Sodom. People of Gomorrah. These names have been etched into the brains of the Israelites since the days of Abraham and Lot. In Genesis 9 God condemned these two cities for their extremely sinful behavior. These cities were filled with greed and lust for more, more, more. No one gave a single thought to caring for those in need. Thinking of caring for others was such an abhorrent thought that giving food or aid to the poor was punishable by death.

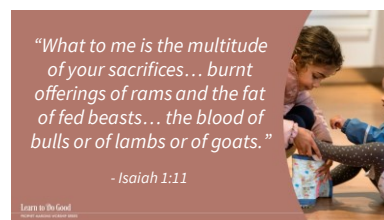


Early in the Old Testament, because of Sodom and Gomorrah's extreme depravity and immorality, God rained down sulfur and fire on these cities. These cities stood for the worst that humanity could become. When Isaiah addresses Israel as Sodom and Gomorrah, his point was crystal clear. Addressing them this way, he wastes no time getting their attention. God then admonishes them, saying, through Isaiah, *"Listen to the teaching of our God!"* The only way to correct their sinful behavior is to reconnect to God and to God's ways.

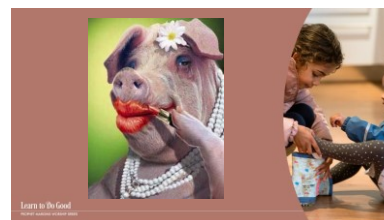
Before the people can address God with a word in their own self-defense, the prophet cuts them off right away. Turning immediately to what the people think makes them look good before God, Isaiah addresses their worship and rituals. Once upon a time these things were pleasing to God. But many years ago, the way of learning to do good was replaced by the desire to look good. Even though they did not get the chance, there is often a pretty standard response, even yet today, when someone questions our moral or ethical character. We quickly exclaim: but I go to church on Sundays! We say this as if that makes us holy and good. And if someone scoffs at that proof, our next line of self-defense is to say that I pray every morning or that I give to my church regularly. Yes, we too have "things", behaviors if you will, that we try to use to offer proof that we really are good, upright people – in spite of evidence otherwise.



God immediately questions the signs of their faith. In verse 11 we read: *“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices... burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts... the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats.”* Yes, the people were doing what they were supposed to do. But it was not affecting how they were living their lives. They just went through the motions. They thought that a multitude of sacrifices would atone for the multitude of their sins. Put into today’s terms, let me ask it this way: If we were living a life full of sin, would there be any amount that you or I could put in the offering plate that would be pleasing to God? Could we ever bring enough to pay for or to atone for our sins?



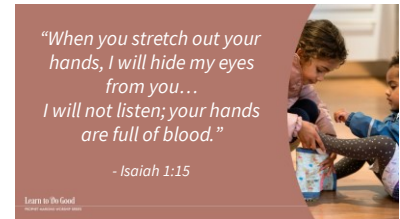
Continuing on God says, *“Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me... I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.”* Just as we will confess and promise to repent of our sins before we come to dip the bread in the cup, so too must the Israelites repent and confess before bringing more and more to the priests for sacrificing on the altar – if it is to mean anything. Otherwise the practice is offensive to God. This last line is key. God cannot endure one more solemn gathering, hands folded in prayer, while hearts are covered in sin. This is the root of the issue, the heart of the matter. The Israelite people are as self-focused and greedy as Sodom and Gomorrah ever were. They just are trying to wrap themselves in the practice of religion, hoping that God does not notice the stench. It reminds me of an expression that I have heard over the years. Sin is still sin, right? Even with pretty lipstick on it.



Continuing to drive home the point home, God declares, *“They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.”* God is tired of the people coming over and over to the altar without repentance in their hearts. God is wearied by the people trying to appear holy and righteous when they were far from it.

Wrapping up the condemnation, we read, *“When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you... I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.”* God sees the heart of the

matter – their hands are full of blood. Sin has covered the people. Sodom and Gomorrah might just be a good description for what has become of the people of God.



God’s vision is no less sharp in 2022. When we come before God and have anger or unforgiveness or some other sin in our heart, God will not listen. We, as a whole, are still very much a people who need to learn to do good. In many ways our world today is slipping further and further back into these days of old, to the days when God and God’s ways had little influence on most of the people, to the days when self was the most important thing there was.

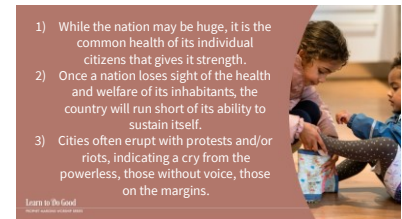


To me these ills are most easily seen in the disparity between those with and those without in our nation. As was the case in the days of the prophets, I believe that the injustice and prejudice and poverty that exists in most of our urban areas and on most of our reservations breaks God’s heart. The ill treatment of the poor, the homeless, and other marginalized groups in many places tears at God’s cords of kindness. In a land with so much material wealth, with so much technology, with so much abundance, hunger and want and many illnesses simply should not exist.

Yet all of these things do exist for millions and millions of our brothers and sisters. In many ways we have lost our connection to one another and we have misplaced our task of caring for the least of these both as a nation and as a people of faith.

In an article I recently read, I found these three insights that apply both the Israel in Isaiah's day and to us today. The first is this: While the nation may be huge, it is the common

health of its individual citizens that gives it strength. For its time, Israel was a large nation. But many of the people, like many in our nation today, were living a much different life than those who had power, wealth, and status. A large group was struggling to survive. National strength wanes when many people live marginalized and in need.



The second insight is this: Once a nation loses sight of the health and welfare of its inhabitants, the country will run short of its ability to sustain itself. When people do not have equal access to education, health care, and other needed services, then they lose hope, and they suffer for it. There are many ramifications, from drug abuse to chronic health issues to increases in depression and suicide. And more recently, we've all been to businesses where they close a day or two a week due to a lack of a vital resource: employees. We have all waited on something because of the shortages. We are losing our ability to sustain ourselves as a whole.

And the third insight is this: Cities often erupt with protests and/or riots, indicating a cry from the powerless, those without voice, those on the margins.

We have seen the tension bubbling just beneath the surface erupt when an act of violence – justified or unjustified – occurs in our cities. Protests are the means that the powerless and disenfranchised use to express their struggles, the place that they have “voice.” There is a progression to these three things. One leads to another. To address these problems one must begin with the people affected. As a nation we must better care for one another. This is a call echoed throughout the scriptures.

Returning to the text, picking up again in verse 16, God gives the prescription for what ails the people during Isaiah’s time, for what ails us today:

“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead

for the widow.” These words echo a prophet that walked the earth just over 2,000 years ago. Do good. Seek justice. Rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Plead for the widow. Perhaps you recognize these as the red-letter words in the Bible, as the words of Jesus.



What would be the prescription today? Would God still plead with us to make ourselves clean, to quit sinning? Would God still implore us to do good and to seek justice and to rescue the oppressed? Would God still press us to defend the orphan and to stand up for the widow? I believe that our God still calls us to these same acts of love and compassion and mercy. The choice remains ours. We must learn to do good.



In today's passage from Isaiah 1, God squarely places the choice upon the people. There is a connection that God sees between all of the people. They too must learn to do good if the people are to collectively prosper. In the closing verses we read, *"If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land, but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."* It is a pretty simple choice. Decide to be willing and obedient and eat the good of the land. Decide to be rebellious and be consumed by the sword. Isaiah pulls no punches, makes no hidden inferences. He is crystal clear. Choose God and find life. Choose the world and find death. Are the choices any different for us and for our world?

Friends, we cannot pretend that God is indifferent to the social, political, economic, and theological instability in our world. We cannot pretend that the gospel – the good news of healing for the sick and the hurting, of redemption for the sinner and the broken, the promise of abundant life for all – that the gospel is just for individuals. The good news is for the community, the city, the reservation, the state, the nation, and the world. We cannot pretend that God turns a blind eye to the "least among us." Therefore, we cannot turn a blind eye either.

If the good news is not for all people, it is for no one. Let me repeat that: If the good news is not for all people, it is for no one. Christ offers healing and redemption and abundant life to all people. May we take up an active role in building a more just and equitable world, a world where all experience blessing and hope and joy and abundance and love. It is hard work. It is risky work. But it is the work that God through Isaiah calls us to. It is the work that the red letters call us to. May it be so.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. What person or group do you know that is in need or lacks something that you can provide? How would meeting this need lead to growth in your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. What sin or wrong have you recently had a hard time either letting go or asking God to forgive you for? In prayer, seek the strength to surrender.
- 3) *Study*. Read Isaiah 2:31-23 and 27-31. How do these words echo the words of Amos and Hosea? How do they apply today?