



“Injustice Corrupts Worship”
Scripture – Isaiah 1:1-4, 10-20
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 10, 2019

God has ignited a blazing inferno in Isaiah’s soul propelling the prophet to launch a blistering attack on the Hebrew people. With compelling poetry, Isaiah opens his mouth and the sentiments of God gush forth. “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” In other words, the people are dumber than donkeys. With that, Isaiah is merely winding up. The pitch is yet to come.

With searing language typical of a prophet, Isaiah pummels the Hebrew people with acerbic speech, calling them “a sinful nation, people loaded down with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly.”

What has triggered such divine indignation? Their lack of concern for the most vulnerable. Specifically, Isaiah says they have failed to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, or plead for the widow.” Such foul treatment of the poor and the powerless has revealed the polluted nature of their worship.

Worship is absolutely essential to people of faith. Worship is where we deepen our understanding of who God is and who God wants us to become. Worship reminds us that WE are not God. Worship is the place where we can nurture a heart of gratitude for the precious gift of life. Worship is vital for people of faith, yet Isaiah declared that the elaborate worship services the people were holding were actually nauseating to God. Further, Isaiah said that by ignoring people in pain, there was blood on their hands. It did not matter whether they had caused the pain; they were still culpable for doing nothing to alleviate it.

To be clear, Isaiah did not denounce worship. He denounced worship that did not produce virtuous people. In Isaiah’s time, the people had designed their liturgical services to appease God, but not to bring their lives into harmony with God’s commandments. They read the Torah, but they did not allow God’s law to seep into their souls. They said elaborate prayers, but they did not seek God’s guidance. They sang hymns praising God, but they did not commit to following God. They sacrificed their animals, but made no personal sacrifice. They contributed their offerings, but they did not offer up their lives.

Isaiah did not condemn worship. He condemned the people for mouthing words and going through motions but not allowing God’s Spirit to transform them into faithful followers.

Many people of faith yearn for a more dynamic spiritual life. However, countless numbers never feel a deep peace, an unquenchable joy, a feeling of harmony with the universe, because their entire focus is on themselves. They have never embraced the wisdom of spiritual traditions that teach we must lose our self to find our soul. We must seek the wellbeing of others to find a meaningful purpose and a spirit of joy. It is what Jesus meant when he

said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:35)

Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino puts it this way: If you work in whatever ways you can for the crucified peoples of the earth, your life will be more meaningful; your faith will be more Christian; and your hope will be more robust.”

It is why people sacrifice their time and energy to mentor a child, expose racism in our judicial system, strive to lift people out of poverty, shelter abused women, devote themselves to saving God’s creation, and stand in solidarity with those who are maligned because of their race, religion, or sexual orientation.

In today’s passage, Isaiah says, “cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice.” In our day, when people speak of justice, they often think in terms of punitive justice. That is, punishing someone who has broken a rule or violated the law. If our six year old shouts an obscenity, we banish him to time out. If our teenager stays out past curfew we ground her and take away the car keys. If someone has broken the law, we expect him to pay a fine or spend time in prison. We want people to pay a price for bad behavior because we hope the punishment will motivate them to do better in the future, and serve as a warning to others not to make the same mistake.

In the Bible, we discover that there are passages in which justice refers to administering a deserved punishment. However, the much more common use of the word “justice” refers to treating people fairly and with dignity. When Isaiah says, “Seek justice” he spells out what he means: “rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” When Jesus and the prophets talk about justice, they almost always focus on caring for the most vulnerable in society.

In the Scriptures, the word “justice” and the word “righteous” are nearly synonyms. In our day, we rarely use the word “righteous” because people often hear “self-righteous,” which describes someone you do not want to be or be around; someone who is smug, intolerant, and full of himself. In the Bible, someone who is righteous is a man or woman who lives a virtuous life a life that is in sync with the principles of God, a life that is *right* with God. The words “justice” and “righteous” are so similar that they are coupled in the Book of Isaiah no fewer than 13 times.

In Matthew 25, we see Jesus channeling Isaiah when he separates the sheep from the goats – those who enter God’s kingdom and those who cut themselves off. Jesus refers to the sheep as the “righteous.” They are the ones who ministered to Jesus when they fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited those who were ill or in prison.

Prophet after prophet chastised the people for failing to care for the physical, emotional, and economic wellbeing of those who were hurting. No one should go without food. No one should go without clothing. No one should go without shelter. God is passionate about the wellbeing of all and prophetic spirituality prompts *US* to be passionate about the wellbeing of all; passionate enough that we are spurred to action.

If the prophet Isaiah were to suddenly appear in our sanctuary some Sunday morning, he would see that we strive for excellence in worship. But we would also show him that we pour tremendous energy into seeking justice for the poor, the oppressed, and the disadvantaged.

We would escort the prophet downstairs to Grace Hall where Monday thru Thursday low income children come to Westminster for a three hour after school program and a nutritional snack rather than going home to an empty house because their parents must work and cannot afford child care. The prophet would witness high school students and adults not only helping them with their reading and math skills, but also teaching them the importance of good values, how to be a success in school and how to prosper in life.

We would invite Isaiah to come back in the summer, when children who have the entire day with nothing to do, come to Westminster for a summer camp focused on playing games, building healthy relationships with peers, and equipping them to make good decisions. Perhaps most important, they are away from an environment with temptations to take the wrong path.

Several of our members might take the prophet along with them to schools where they mentor low income children from single parent homes. Isaiah would see that these mentors not only tutor children with their schoolwork, they become a compassionate listener, a positive influence, a trusted guide, and an adult who believes in them and encourages them to excel and fulfill their dreams.

Volunteers from our church family would invite Isaiah to stand by their side as they serve meals to people who cannot afford it. Others would have the prophet ride along with them when they drive elderly people to doctor's appointments. Some would invite him to join them when they visit one of our homebound members or sit and listen to someone who grieves the loss of a loved one.

We would show Isaiah how we convert our Sunday school classrooms to bedrooms when we house temporarily homeless families that have been hit by a medical crisis or lost a job, and need a place to stay until they can get back on their feet.

We would tell the prophet how we have provided both the labor and the finances to build Habitat Houses so that families who cannot come up with a down payment and make high mortgage payments can purchase their own home with an interest free loan.

Isaiah would be impressed to see that we have members who are lobbying for sane gun laws and working on criminal justice reform; others who are learning more about racism, white privilege and the obstacles people of color face.

I suspect the prophet would applaud us for having clothing collections for Syrian refugees who were forced to flee their communities or face certain death. He would thank us for resettling a refugee family from Afghanistan that was targeted by the Taliban for assisting American military troops. He would tell us to keep up our efforts in Israel/Palestine to end the occupation and never to give up working for peace and justice.

Isaiah would commend us for contributing to a medical institute in Congo and for providing support for preserving the world's second largest rain forest. He would praise our work in Guatemala where we have enabled hundreds of families to have clean drinking water, provided sanitary latrines, and support a thriving women's health clinic.

Although prophets can be tough characters with harsh language, I think Isaiah's message to us would be an encouragement to keep up the good work and not to let down. Because when we respond to God's call to make things right, God's kingdom can gain a foothold and lives can be transformed.

By the way, one of the lives that is transformed may be yours.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Water and Wine and Life-Giving Word —
You have called us from east and west, north and south,
from city streets and quiet cul-de-sacs.
You have called us away from the rhythms of daily life,
from routines that wear us down and news reports that rile us up.
You have called us here, into sacred time and space,
to form and transform us into the people you created us to be.

We come — weary and worn, stressed and stretched thin,
overburdened, overwhelmed, lonely or lost ...

We come, seeking —
seeking hope to quiet tides of despair and peace to calm anxious hearts,
seeking the comfort of community's embrace
and the inspiration of soaring song,
seeking guidance from ancient words enlivened by your Spirit's breath ...

We come to gather 'round table, font, and pulpit —
reminders that you claim us as kin and wash us in grace,
that you nourish our bodies and sustain our spirits,
that you root us in sacred story and nurture us to grow in faith.

Holy One, we have come.
Take us as we are and summon out what we shall be.
Form and transform us. Renew and refresh us.
And send us, we pray, as witnesses to your liberating Word.

God of the Prophets, the Priests, the Parable-Preaching Son —
We know that our prayers and praise,
our words and worship,
are but noisy gongs and clanging cymbals
unless they resound in waves of mercy and love.
As we return to the rhythms of daily life,
help us live as people who are grounded in sacred story,
sustained in spirit, and washed in grace,
so that we may proclaim the Gospel in word and deed.

As we greet neighbors who are
weary and worn, stressed and stretched thin,
give us the grace to lend a helping hand.
As we encounter others who are seeking
hope to quiet tides of despair
and peace to calm anxious hearts,
give us the compassion to offer a listening ear.
As we go forth into a world burdened by suffering
and plagued by injustice,
give us the courage to rescue the oppressed,
to defend the orphan, to plead for the widow,

to pursue your vision of wholeness for all.

On this Veterans' Day weekend,
we remember all who have given their skill,
their time, their energy, their very lives,
in service to our country.

And we reflect upon the causes
that have led these service members and their families,
to sacrifice so much.

We find that our prayers of thanksgiving
mingle with prayers of lament,
as we yearn for the age when
nations will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.

As we thirst after your vision of *Shalom*,
help us to create a warless world, where all your children flourish.

This we pray in the name of One
who came in the tradition of the prophets
to proclaim your reign of peace, the One who gave us words to pray:
Our Father ...