

“A Role Reversal”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
August 7, 2022

Friends in Christ....

Though the prophet Isaiah shows up numerous times in the Revised Common Lectionary, we usually think of the prophet during the Advent season when his prophecies are about the coming of Emanuel, God with us. Major prophets are determined by the number of chapters and Isaiah is 66 chapters long. It is one of four major prophets. There are also 12 minor prophets who have only a few chapters. Isaiah prophesized to Judah over 700 years before Christ warning the people of God’s unhappiness with the way they lived their lives and the hollowness of their worship practices. I wonder what God would say about us today how we put our faith into action. St. Paul’s working on a Habitat for Humanity house is an example of putting faith into action

We will begin by looking at the Isaiah text from chapter 1. Verse 1 sets the time of the work of the prophet, and then beginning in verse ten the prophet lays out the indictment of the people.

Old Testament Lesson Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 (CEB)

1 The vision about Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah, Amoz’s son, saw in the days of Judah’s kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

Hands Filled With Bloodshed

¹⁰ Hear the LORD’s word, you leaders of Sodom.

Listen to our God’s teaching,
people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ What should I think about all your sacrifices?
says the LORD.

I’m fed up with entirely burned offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts.

I do not want the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats.

¹² When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from you,
this trampling of my temple’s courts?

¹³ Stop bringing worthless offerings.
Your incense repulses me.

New moon, sabbath, and the calling of an assembly—

I cannot stand wickedness with celebration!

¹⁴ I hate your new moons and your festivals.

They have become a burden that I am tired of bearing.

¹⁵ When you extend your hands,

I will hide my eyes from you.

Even when you pray for a long time,

I will not listen.

Your hands are stained with blood.

¹⁶ Wash! Be clean!

Remove your ugly deeds from my sight.

Put an end to such evil;

¹⁷ learn to do good.

Seek justice:

help the oppressed;

defend the orphan;

plead for the widow.

¹⁸ Come now, and let us settle this,

says the LORD.

Though your sins are like scarlet,

they will be white as snow.

If they are red as crimson,

they will become like wool.

¹⁹ If you agree and obey,

you will eat the best food of the land.

²⁰ But if you refuse and rebel,

you will be devoured by the sword.

The LORD has said this.

The importance of this text is that it summarizes the message of the truly “major” prophet Isaiah. Significantly, it tells us why we should listen to the prophet – what he writes is the “vision” he “saw.” That is prophetic talk for “what you are about to read is a revelation from God,” not something that Isaiah made up on his own, nor the result of his religious imagination and theological insights.

Verse 1 indicates that Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of four kings in Judah. To place it in the context of larger history, the northern Kingdom, Israel, was crushed and taken into exile by Assyria in 722. Judah itself was nearly wiped out in 701, and the Babylonian Exile began in 597. Thus, Isaiah spoke God's word during a time fraught with international danger.

During a good deal of that time, however, Judah was enjoying a boom time. However, there was a cancer that was eating away at the heart of the nation, the treatment of the less fortunate. Or to put it in terms that fit the mood of Isaiah better, verses 10-20 give us a preview of God's legal case or complaint against his people, complete with possible sentencing guidelines. In the first verses, God strongly rejects the religious practices of Judah. Then God clearly spells out the justice and righteousness he requires of his people. And finally, God summons his people into his chambers to offer them a deal that will allow them to avoid punishment. But he also threatens them with dire consequences if they refuse his offer.

God's rejection of the religious practices of Judah could not have been more complete, which is a surprise given that God himself required those practices. This harsh condemnation came possibly because of Israel's hyper-religiosity. Nearly every conceivable religious term is mentioned: sacrifices and burnt offerings, fat and blood, bulls and lambs and goats, procession and incense, New Moons and Sabbaths and appointed feasts. The Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) is filled with instructions about all of these things; they were an important part of Israel's covenant obligations to the God of Abraham.

Why? "Your hands are full of blood...." Well, yes, of course, from all that sacrificing. No, not the blood of bulls and lambs and goats, but the blood of human beings, of your fellow Israelites. Does God mean that literally or figuratively? Probably figuratively, but it's no less serious to God. Israel has been abusing their fellow Jews and that abuse made their worship unacceptable to God.

Listen as God gets specific. "Wash and make yourselves clean...." God is not talking here about the ritualistic washing as prescribed in Torah, nor even about the more substantive washing away of sins. That may come, but first Israel must genuinely repent, which involves a change in behavior. In effect, God is saying, "Do not think you can make this right with a bit of water and some weak words of confession."

Instead, “take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!” What specifically do you want of us, O God? Or to put it in the parallel terms of Amos 5 and Micah 6, “What does the Lord require of you?” In two words, “seek justice.” So, what does that mean? “Encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

The justice that God wants for his people is social justice—not merely giving a piece of bread to an orphan or a new coat to the widow but supporting those who are oppressed in our society. The justice God demands of his people involves protecting the defenseless. There were no social services in those days, so other people had to take care of the least, the marginalized, the invisible people. And so the call for justice continues today.

The Luke text from chapter 12 for today comes from a part of a long narrative of Jesus heading to Jerusalem sometimes called the “travel Narrative”. Again, Jesus says that God’s kingdom is different than the world’s kingdom in that God serves others. The least are to be served, and we hear a short parable of a significant role reversal.

There was a belief back then that there was only so much wealth to go around. For one person to gain wealth would have meant that someone else would lose wealth. The ministry of Jesus encouraged people to sell what they had and then to give to those in need. You can imagine how popular that was. We hear that message in our Luke text followed by two short parables. From Luke 12:

Gospel Lesson: Luke 12:32-40 (CEB)

³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights in giving you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions and give to those in need. Make for yourselves wallets that do not wear out—a treasure in heaven that never runs out. No thief comes near there, and no moth destroys. ³⁴Where your treasure is, there your heart will be too.

Warning About Being Prepared

³⁵“Be dressed for service and keep your lamps lit. ³⁶Be like people waiting for their master to come home from a wedding celebration, who can immediately open the door for him when he arrives and knocks on the door. ³⁷Happy are those servants whom the master finds waiting up when he arrives. I assure you that, when he arrives, he will dress himself to serve, seat them at the table as honored guests, and wait on them. ³⁸Happy are

those whom he finds alert, even if he comes at midnight or just before dawn.
³⁹But know this, if the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his home to be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at a time when you do not expect him.”

May God bless our hearing of his holy word. Amen.

Karoline Lewis has an interesting observation: “Jesus has a lot to say in these chapters (the travel narratives), much of it unique to Luke’s Gospel. Some of Jesus’ best-known phrases, those pithy sayings that would certainly make it into a Jesus bestseller, *Helpful Advice for Busy Christians*, are found in the gospel reading for today.”

We sometimes forget that the early believers were expecting the second coming of Christ almost immediately, and probably before many believers had died. Luke is writing partially for that group and the parables are telling those believers that we do not know when the second coming will happen but be prepared.

The first parable of the servants and the returning master encourages a balance regarding attention to both future rewards and current responsibilities. The early Christians literally believed that the return of their Lord would take place at Passover as so many of his important events took place at Passover in Jerusalem. When the Christ did not return the Church began celebrating the Lord’s Supper. The parable of the Master serving the slaves would have been a shocking role reversal for those who heard it. Slavery was widespread in the ancient world, and a slave had no rights or privileges and was expected to wait on the needs of the master regardless of the time of the day. For the master to serve the slaves would have been unthinkable. Yet Jesus is trying to explain by example of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like that God is the servant to His people.

The second parable underscores the importance of right behavior in the present; the servants are given responsibilities. The steward who is found doing that when the master returns is rewarded. The one who abuses his authority by taking advantage of his situation is punished.

The surprise in this story about a master, servants, and a wedding banquet is not necessarily that we are found asleep—we are the servants, after all, and sleepy at that. Who hasn’t wanted to curl up into a ball and sleep until all that befalls our

world and us comes to an end? It's no surprise that the master calls on the servants to stay awake and alert, and some read the end of this story as prescriptive.

But what exactly happens when the Son of man comes upon the servants whose willingness is trumped by their fear that causes them to fall into sleep? Is it judgment, and thus cause for greater fear?

Could it be the opposite. In the shadow of uncertainty, fear and hope look similar. Reading the end of this story through a lens of hope, one first sees the revelation of our sleepiness. And then, when the door opens and the Son of man arrives, the first word spoken is one of invitation. The Son of man's belt is fastened. All has been prepared. As sleepy and as afraid as we are, the word of invitation opens us to the promise that we are not alone. We are seen. We are heard. We are nourished and sustained. There is room for us, now and into the future.

This kind of story opens us up to life together. We long for an invitation to this table but also for community. And in that longing, the invitation to follow in the ways of God is disclosed. In ways human and divine, we are set free from isolation into wide-open spaces of accompaniment. We come to the table to celebrate the Lord's Supper as we will do shortly.

When it's all said and done, we are invited to sit and eat together and to tell our stories in the light of a day that has no end. We do not know when our lives will come to an end. Nor do we know when the second coming will take place. But, could it be saying that we will meet Jesus in our own resurrection?

Thanks be to God. Amen.