

The book of Isaiah begins, “The vision of Isaiah, son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Judah’s kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah...”. It is as if Isaiah wants to make sure, right from the start, that everybody knows this wasn’t his idea; it came from a Higher Being and he is only passing on the news. And if I were Isaiah, I think I’d want to get that straight as well because what Isaiah has to say, no one wants to hear, no one wants to preach in any church I know of. Speaking to the 21st century church from the prophets is a hard sell these days. Yet, from prophets like Isaiah, there is no hiding because their approach to living was what shaped the heart and practice of Jesus. So we followers of Jesus have no choice but to delve in head first whether we like it or not.

In our text this morning, the prophet whose name means “Yahweh has saved” or “Yahweh may save” offers a vigorous critique of the world empires and their assumption of power. Isaiah urges Judah not to ally itself with any of these great powers but, rather, rely on God in all things. The idolatries and injustices of these empires, these nations, will bring them down. Judah’s best course of action is to repent and return to Yahweh to practice complete loyalty and right worship. For you see, the act of worship from some people is making God angry, so angry that God pulls out the “Sodom & Gomorrah” card and plays it. God says, “Listen to my message, you Sodom-schooled leaders. Receive God’s revelation, you Gomorrah-schooled people. Why this frenzy of sacrifices? Don’t you think I have had my fill of burnt sacrifices? When you come before me, who ever gave you the idea of acting like this, running here and there, doing this and that – all this sheer commotion in the place provided for worship? Quit your worship charades, I can’t stand your trivial religious games...I’m sick of your

religion, religion, religion, while you go right on sinning.” God makes it clear that the problem with worship is the disconnect between what happens inside the sanctuary and what happens outside of it. A word such as this doesn’t lose its relevance over the centuries, because this is consistently a problem for God’s people – the gap between our practice and our praise.” As one poster said in a homeless shelter, “How can you worship with a homeless person on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?” Though glib, it points to our perpetual problem: translating our worship into action. In the Message version of the text, God says to Judah and us, “Clean up your act. Sweep your lives clean of your evildoings so I don’t have to look at them any longer. Say no to wrong. Learn to do good. Help the down-and-out. Stand up for the homeless. Go to bat for the defenseless. Work for justice...”. Work for justice.

Not long enough ago, one very well known TV news columnist, whom shall remain nameless because he might be your favorite, spoke very persuasively to his TV audience pleading with them, “to stop supporting any church that dares to use the word ‘justice’ in worship. They are poisoning you.” Now I am not sure what Bible this guy is reading but deleting the word justice from the Bible would literally take half of it away. The idea of justice dominates the prophets, the historical books, as well as much of Jesus’ parables. Now some may argue the columnist was making a distinction between political and religious justice but you be the judge as to whether there is such a distinction? Hebrew scripture scholar Walter Brueggeman has heavily studied the word “justice” as it is used in the Bible and explains that biblical justice “is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them.” Abraham Lincoln didn’t give freedom to the slaves, he returned to them the freedom of which they never should have been deprived. Great Britain in 1948 didn’t grant independence to India, it

returned to India the same independence that was always theirs to enjoy, just as much as any other citizen of Great Britain. All of these justice issues were manifested in the heat of a political arena, not in any party system but within a system of governing the people. Justice within the lens of God addresses those power relationships in society where some folks do not have what belongs to them because others have, use, and enjoy what is not theirs. Micah 6:8 says, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice..." Seeking justice means to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them. It is to redescribe the world we live in. To do justice as God does justice is to intervene in the social and governmental order as Moses did in Pharaoh's court when he insisted on freedom for the Hebrew slaves, as Nathan did in David's court when he protested the king's actions against Uriah the Hittite, as Elijah did when he thundered against King Ahab and Jezebel for taking land that wasn't theirs. In other words, the Bible calls us to become shaping souls of society wherever we live and work, helping to redefine the world so that it fits the description given to us through the prophets' faith. The Bible invites us not to try and buy off God or recreate God in our own image but to make our actions match our worship.

Craig Barnes tells of a legend well known in the mountains of Nepal. "In the cool air of a mountaintop, a huge wax god sat in solitary splendor. Generations of villagers from the valley below made their way up the mountain to worship at the shrine. There came a time, though, when some decided to bring the god down from its chilly citadel and establish it in the center of the marketplace. It was convenient then, and worship was not such a bother. But in the heat, the wax god softened and sagged. The villagers realized they could now make a few changes to their god. Those who sought its features too stern molded a delightful smile on its face. Soon

the god looked just the way they wanted him to look. But the god continued to sag in the heat. Little by little, the people began to take away pieces of the wax to light their homes. Soon all of the wax, and all of the god, was gone.” The point Barnes makes is that true worship does not bring God into conformity with what we’ve always wanted but invites us to fully experience the Sacred Creator of our lives and for us to be transformed instead.

It is easy to talk about God, to sing hymns to God, to write a check for 2, 5 or 8 percent of our income and then go home and never spend another thought, dime, minute, or ounce of energy on the things that God says matter most, to never let down our defenses and ponder what more we can do. These are the things that really tick God off. So Isaiah gives us some practical actions through which we can reshape society while being reshaped ourselves – rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow, seek justice, learn to do good. They seem pretty straight forward but even “learning to do good” is far more complicated than we might imagine. “Learning to do good” means that we have to unlearn our hurtful ways. In our society, we tend to pay attention to the virtues of independence and autonomy rather than dependence, interdependence, and vulnerability with one another. Because of that, learning, and especially unlearning, can only take place in the absence of defensiveness. When we are defensive, we shun all acts of learning and unlearning. We cling to what we have always believed to be true and fearfully defend it without merit. It is only when we drop our defenses, that we can learn... and we only drop our defenses, when we love and are loved. Focusing on the practice of love, and all that means according to scripture, helps us connect both our worship and day to day life.

The good news is that God's anger is not forever. God consistently offers an olive branch as seen in verse 18. "Come now, let us argue it out.. let's settle this" God says. Though your mistakes have been many, they shall be forgiven, cleaned up and wiped away. In lifting your hands to prayer, lift them to the vulnerable as well. When you worship, do not forget those poor and sick and small and weak ones that God remembers so well. When you love God, then know whom God loves and let that be the guiding force of your week. Come now, let's settle this, says Yahweh who saves, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Amen.