“***The Real Treasure***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, August 11, 2019

**Isaiah 1:1, 10–18**

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. . . .

I cannot endure your solemn assemblies with iniquity.
14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;
 they have become a burden to me. . . .

15 Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen;
 your hands are full of blood.

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17learn to do good;
 seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

18 Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow.

**Luke 12:32–36**

32 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. . . . 33Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

35 “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.”

Can you imagine going to the temple on Sabbath and seeing the imposing figure of Isaiah standing at one of the temple gates, shouting this message, seeming like an angry Gandalf? He would certainly demand your attention as he attacks his targets. He calls the rulers of Judah the rulers of Sodom, and he calls the people the people of Gomorrah. The rulers are unjust. They are not rescuing the oppressed or defending the orphan (1:16). And the people’s worship is worthless. Their costly sacrifices are of no use. God is revolted by their incense, and he hates their festivals. Why? I think there are two reasons: the oppression of the widow and orphan, and the wrong-headedness of the ritual—thinking that expensive offerings can buy God’s favor. So there is sneaky and greedy behavior by the rich, and there is false religion by everyone, when they think that God can be paid off with big sacrifices.

Then there’s that strange line “I will not listen; your hands are full of blood” (1:15). Now, the priests’ hands will certainly get bloody during the ceremony. It happens in the course of slaying the animals, which they do quickly, without causing a lot of pain. I don’t think animal blood is the issue. Isaiah is hinting that there’s *human* blood on the priests’ hands. The next verse says “remove the evil of your doings.” Evidently, the priests were involved in some violence against people, but he gives no details.

There are other anti-sacrificial passages, three in Hosea, two in Jeremiah, three in the Psalms, one each in Micah and Amos, but this one is the most intense. In all these texts, the sages and prophets criticize or even mock those who think they can win God’s favor by offering him food. Psalm 50 makes fun of it, having God say “if I were hungry, I would not tell you” (v. 12).

The issue for *us* is not animal sacrifice, but church rituals. All religions develop rituals, and believers are tempted to think that they somehow impress God. If so, we are fooling ourselves. Shared worship is worthy, and it performs a good teaching function, but it does not confer holiness.

What God wants from us is a real commitment to spiritual values, and that needs to permeate our whole lives. So: “Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed” (Isa 1:17). And finally, “Come now, let us reason together, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow” (1:18). Without any rituals at all, you can have a straightforward conversation with God. So after the scolding comes this wonderful message: you can discuss and reason together with God! Every prophet yields a positive message if hang in there long enough.

The core message is this: grasp the essentials; don’t be wrapped up in secondary things. Rituals are secondary. Don’t be fooled into thinking that the ritual proves your devotion. It proves nothing, really. “Bringing offerings is futile” Isaiah says (1:13). Instead, “come, let us reason together.”

What a surprising revelation this is! Reasoning together not only means talking directly to God, but getting a response. God will clean away your sins without any ritual, without any sacrificial violence. And that’s where we can segue to the gospel, because Jesus says that God wants to save us, and there is no reference to any ritual or sacrifice. It is God’s good *pleasure* to give us the kingdom. Look for the kingdom and its wine and milk without price, to use another image from Isaiah (55:1). Build up treasure in heaven through good thinking and good choices. These are treasures that cannot be stolen or damaged. God preserves every good thing. I trust that God will preserve my memory of visiting the library with my mom, and of hearing my dad sing “Home on the Range.” I think of Karen and our trip to Germany, and of our many enjoyable days here at this church. These are worthy memories that I will never lose.

So we should not be caught up with earthly and temporary riches, nor be overcome with worry or resentment. It is true that good things *can* be lost on this earth. War and injustice and cruelty can ruin lives and crush hopes. I am not advocating naiveté or ignorance about our lives here. I am just pointing out the promise of future vindication, restoration, and growth, a promise that is foundational for our faith.

Let your heart be with the eternal treasures, the permanent truths, and the undying love of Jesus. *Then* you will be ready for the Master to return. In fact, you will be ready to live abundantly every day. Be not afraid.