

Today we are going to continue in the Old Testament with a reading from the prophet Isaiah. The book of Isaiah is one of the longer books in the Bible. In fact, most scholars today think that it was written by at least two and probably 3 different writers and written over hundreds of years.

The first part of the prophecy of Isaiah covers chapters 1–39. The end of chapter 39 and the beginning of chapter 40 is a clear shift in focus. Today's reading will be from the first chapter of the book.

The first 39 chapters of the book of Isaiah has some very harsh words to say to the nation of Israel. This portion of the book was written over about 40 years of time and about 750 years before the birth of Christ.

The first 39 chapters of the book of Isaiah lead up to the time in 721 BC when Israel is conquered by the Assyrians. Israel had been one country of Israel and Judah but then it split apart due to politics about 200 years earlier than our reading. Isaiah's words are addressed to the southern kingdom of Judah even though he will sometimes call it Israel or Jerusalem.

Isaiah's words address both a nation and a faith community. So, as we look at this text, I invite you to hear it addressed both to our church and to our nation. We are invited to listen to these words being addressed to Allison Creek and also the United States of America.

In the first 9 verses of Isaiah, we are introduced to Isaiah as being the son of Amoz and that these words are written over the period of time ruled by 4 kings of Judah. Old Testament prophets usually dated themselves by who was king at the time of their writing.

Isaiah begins by being blunt and saying that God raised up children to be faithful but that they were now rebelling against God. In verse 2, Isaiah says that, "the ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, and the people do not understand." God is asking why the people continue to rebel against God.

In this passage which we are about to read, Isaiah is going to compare Israel to Sodom and Gomorrah. Today, when Christians hear of the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, we have been trained to relate these towns to sexual sins. But the Old Testament writers referred to these towns negatively for the ways they treated the poor and oppressed and how they were punished because of this.

In this reading, Isaiah is going to raise a prophetic voice against Israel for the way it continues to conduct religious services but also mistreat the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow.

Read Isaiah 1:10-26 (Reading is extended from what is printed)

These are harsh words spoken against the people of Israel by the prophet Isaiah. According to Isaiah, God has had enough of their sacrifices that they offer in worship. God sees their sacrifices and their worship services as worthless. God even calls their incense an abomination to God. God cannot endure their worship gatherings.

In fact, according to Isaiah, God no longer chooses to be present for their worship services. When prayers are offered, God no longer listens. When the people of Israel gather to worship, God chooses to be someplace else.

And why is God so upset with the people of Israel? Why is God choosing to desert them at this time? According to Isaiah, God calls them out for not doing four things.

The people of the nation who gather in worship are not seeking justice. The people of the nation who gather in worship are not taking care of the oppressed. The people of the nation who gather in worship are not defending the orphan. The people of the nation are not listening to the pleas of the widow.

Pretty straightforward to what they are supposed to be doing if they are to be faithful followers of God. Pretty straightforward that they are falling short. They are unfaithful because of the way they are treating the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow.

So now let's turn this text on to us. Let's turn this text onto us who gather in worship here in the USA. How well are we doing these days? How well would you rank us in terms of God's standards?

How well are we as a country doing in seeking justice? How well are we doing in creating systems that are fair for all? How well are we doing in making sure that everyone is treated fairly and equally?

How well are we doing in defending the orphan? What are we doing to help those whose parents are taken away from them? How well are we doing to prevent people from becoming orphans?

How well are we doing in lifting up the voices of the oppressed? How well are we doing in speaking up for those who are powerless and having their rights trampled on? Are we more focused on protecting the rights of the powerful or the powerless?

There is a divide in this country among Christians. Many Christians who consider themselves evangelical mainly focus on individual sinfulness. How evil is causing us to personally fall away from following the ways of God. Other Christians who consider themselves progressive tend to mainly focus on corporate sins. How is evil causing us to fall away as a society from following the ways of God.

I think this passage can be read as an indictment among both ways of understanding sin. How are you personally falling short in working for a more just community? How are you personally falling short in caring for the needs of the oppressed, widow, and orphan?

But this passage can also be read to address our corporate sin as a nation and to Christian churches. When we in the church remain silent when a young white man enters a Wal-Mart in El Paso, Texas with a high-powered weapon in order to kill as many Mexicans as possible, what does God say to us for supporting a system that creates widows and orphans?

When we in the church remain silent or offer our support when our government does a massive raid upon people working at jobs cutting up the chicken that we will enjoy for dinner today resulting in children finishing their first day of school and having no parent present to pick them up, what does God say to us for supporting a system that creates orphans?

It's easy for us to remain silent. It's easy for us to say this is not our problem. It's easy for us to support the status quo if it benefits us and our privilege. It's easy for us to only offer up our thoughts and prayers. It's easy for us to say that these are simply issues left to politicians.

But as we remain silent or offer our support to these types of actions, I invite the words of the prophet Isaiah to haunt us. Hear the words again from the 16th and 17th verse of Isaiah.

“Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. Seek justice, defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

And what is the result if we refuse to do this? Hear these words from the 15th verse.

“When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. Even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood.”

We may really need to examine our national priorities if we want God to listen to our Christian thoughts and prayers. AMEN.

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-Given August 11, 2019 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)