

Make a Change

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

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. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; 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, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

¹⁸ Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. ¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

The name "Isaiah" means "YHWH has saved" or "YHWH may save." One theme recurring in the book of Isaiah is God's saving sovereignty over history and all the nations. *YHWH* is no mere local tribal deity but one whose glory fills the whole earth (6:3), to whom all the nations will one day stream, and who will "judge between the nations" (2:4). In light of divine sovereignty over all the nations, Isaiah offers a vigorous critique of empires and their presumption. History is not left to the powers of empire. History is in God's hands, and so also are the hated empires of Assyria and (later) Babylon. Isaiah urged that Judah should not ally itself with any of these great powers but, rather, rely upon God in all things. The idolatries and injustices of these empires would bring them down. In the meantime, these powers might well be used as instruments in the hands of *YHWH* to carry out a judgment upon Judah for its own idolatries and injustices. Judah's best course, then, was repentance and return to *YHWH*

to offer full allegiance and right worship. Isaiah extended a hope that "YHWH may save." Beyond the needed judgment/purification a faithful remnant would return. **Anna Case-Winters**

In light of Isaiah's main goal, this scripture is still scary! Launch the words "Sodom and Gomorrah" at a group of people, and already your hearers are clear: judgment is coming. This text comes down like a gavel in a courtroom—or perhaps more like a sledgehammer. "Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!" These words do not make us feel good or secure and we are afraid of what is coming!

We have been faithful in attending worship, when we could have stayed home with relatives or gone Up North, and this is the scripture for today! Isaiah makes it difficult for us to hear the word from the Lord—who wants to hear such news as "God hates your worship"?—but it is possible the words of the prophet have something to teach us today. In this passage, rough words make way for sweet promises; so I must be faithful.

The scripture begins with a call for the leaders ("rulers of Sodom") and the masses ("people of Gomorrah") to hear what God has to say. As modern-day listeners, we may not be so ready to hear such an accusation! The phrase "Sodom and Gomorrah" often has had overtones of sexual sin in general and homosexual behavior in particular. These cities have become a byword for wickedness in the extreme and divine annihilation. The particular wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah—contrary to popular assumptions—is a matter of their greed and injustice. The fullest accounting of the "sin" of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament is in the book of Ezekiel: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezek. 16:49). It is not until the Hellenistic period that sexual conduct is even alluded to in connection with these cities. As the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah became bywords for injustice and divine judgment, Isaiah implies, the southern kingdom of Judah then mirrored their condition.

What does Isaiah want his listeners to hear? What does he want us to hear? God hates our worship. The divine speech is laced with harsh and horrible rejections: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? ... I have had enough.... I do not delight. ... Who asked this from your hand? ... No more ... futile ... abomination ... iniquity. ... Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates." Verse 14 seems to be the withering culmination, but it actually gets worse: "Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen." God will not even listen to prayers! The reason for such absolute rejection is clear: "When you stretch out your hands, ... your hands are full of blood." God will not hear the pleas of people who come to pray with blood on their hands. This verse makes most plain the source of God's problem with worship—the disconnect between what happens inside the sanctuary and what happens outside of it.

A word such as this does not lose its relevance, because this is always a core problem for God's people—the gap between our practice and our praise. "How can you worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?" the poster at the homeless shelter asks. The poster may seem glib, but it does point to our perpetual problem: translating our worship into action. Our inattention to injustice delegitimizes our praise.

If we want to lift our blood-soaked hands to God, there is only one thing left to do: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean" (v. 16). What is required to come clean before God? "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice" (vv. 16-17). In the broadest terms, it is the turning of a life and the turning of a community of lives. In specific terms, doing good and seeking justice look like this: "rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (v. 17). If the people of God want to lift their hands to God in prayer, they will extend their hands to the most vulnerable as well. (These are instructions for us as well!) What we heard first offered strong and challenging words, here is the chance for us to repent and to dream—to think imaginatively about how our public daily lives might rightly coincide with right worship of God. Isaiah sets a good example with his list of specific things the people of God do if they want to learn to do good; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;

cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. So what are some practical ways we can worship God. We already do some of them:

- We donate and worship and serve meals with the people who are helped by Carriage Town Ministries;
- We host a birthday party for Jesus and give gifts to children who have a parent who is incarcerated.
- We give food donations to the South end Soup Kitchen.
- We individually give donations of clothing to Crossroads.
- This year we gave scholarships for youth to attend Christian camp.
- Many of us give your time and resources to political action to help solve the root causes of poverty in our community.
- We have given to causes such as reconciliation (to help end racism) and week of compassion (to help in areas of natural disasters).

God also calls us to seek other ways, to help those in need, physically and spiritually!

It would be easy to end here—with a list of good things for people to go and do—but the text does not stop. The final word is God's—just as the final action will be—and a famous word it is: "Come now, let us argue it out ... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow" (v. 18). The more familiar version of this can be found in the NIV, "they shall be *as white (or clean) as snow*" which resonates with Psalm 51:7, "Wash me, and I shall be *whiter than snow*." Ultimately, whatever washing there is will come from God's hands, not the people's. The only question is whether or not the people—we among them—are willing. **Stacey Simpson Duke**