

I have begun this morning, by reading the pericope from Matthew, wrong end 'round, or, as my Mama would have said, "bass ackwards." I've taken the Gospel reading and the Old Testament passage which will underlie the majority of my message this morning once more from Brian McLaren's suggested course of study in We Make the Road by Walking. But I quickly decided this week that I didn't want to read the whole of his suggested passage from Isaiah, chapter 1, verse 1 through chapter 2, verse 5, in one protracted chunk. That's a long reading and I think it will be easier to digest if we walk through it together in smaller bits. And also, I wanted to hold up the promise of the ending, both in the Isaiah passage and in the words of Jesus, to make the sometimes difficult nature of the Isaiah prophecy easier to hear. I find I can deal with almost any difficulty if I keep before me the promise of God's love that wins in the end. As my wise spouse often says, "It'll all be ok in the end. If it isn't ok, it isn't the end."

A few quick words about Isaiah 1:1 – 2:5 before I plunge in. Brian McLaren suggests that this passage encapsulates the overall theme of the Old Testament and that seems very apt to me. It also, according to some scholars, encapsulates the themes of the whole book of Isaiah. Some scholars take that as evidence that it was written and added at the end of the compilation of the book, which you may remember, according to scholarly consensus, is likely the work of three writers covering over a century of the experiences of the Children of Israel. Others, however, say that this introduction was written by or compiled from the work of the First Isaiah. If that is the case, it was written or delivered to the people of Jerusalem in an era to which I think we can relate. Unsurpassed corruption marked the government of Judah. The gap between rich and poor had never been greater. The religious establishment backed the civil power rather than standing for justice and righteousness. Judah's international prestige was at an all-time low and their great enemy to the northeast was pulling the strings on a puppet king. Does any of this sound familiar?

Keeping that connection in mind, let's also look at this first great section of Isaiah in terms of the history of the Chosen People. Isaiah begins with a look back, from Yahweh's point of view, at the story from the Exodus to his present. "Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!" The hearer or reader is reminded that God brought the Hebrew slaves out of bondage in Egypt, made them a free people, and led them to the Promised Land. Once there, however, they turned to the worship of their neighbors' gods, neglected what God had taught them about the way to live, and generally failed in their calling to be a blessing to all nations. Incidentally, if that line about the ox and the donkey sounds familiar, it's the inspiration for all those folk tales about the animals at the Nativity.

Isaiah is hardly the first messenger from God to point out the failings of God's people. Moses and Joshua continually warned the rebellious Hebrew tribes what would result from their lack of fidelity to the covenant God had made with them at Sinai. Once the Chosen People were installed in the Promised Land, they went through many cycles of forgetting their promises to Yahweh, experiencing the nasty results of their poor choices, calling on God for help, and being rescued by military leaders, known to us as "the Judges." Some of them we remember, some

have faded into obscurity: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah and Barak, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, Samson. Some of these were true servants of Yahweh. Some, like Samson brought destruction upon themselves in the end. When Israel turned to kings to lead them, Yahweh sent prophets: Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and more. And for a while, the people would hear and repent and live as they were called to do. But always, they would fall away and suffer the consequences. Isaiah says, “Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil.”

I feel the need to interject at this point that the spiritual journey of the Children of Israel, corporately, has a great deal in common with the spiritual journey of humankind, individually. If you have never suddenly looked at your life and realized that you felt as if you had been beaten, realized that it is your own choices which have brought you to that pass, then you are a rare and blessed individual indeed. I will freely confess to you, my sisters and brothers, that although I was raised in the faith and in the company of the Church, gave my heart to Jesus when I was 9 and was baptized, heard the call on my life early and have been seminary-trained and ordained by you in this very place, I continue to struggle to always put God’s will for my life first and not behind my own choices. I don’t ascribe to the theory of Original Sin but I am very aware of the fallenness of human nature, my own in particular.

Isaiah, of course, is preaching to a nation as well as to a gathering of individuals. “Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.” Regardless of how we date this passage, whether before or after the fall of Jerusalem, the people of Judah were in a bad way when these words were spoken. If we hear the voice of First Isaiah, Assyria has already destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Judah is in terrible danger. If this passage was added after the Exile, then the Children of Israel are reduced to a client state, struggling to rebuild, never to be their own rulers again until the brief dynasty of the Hasmoneans, which ended before the birth of Jesus. It is a warning that should be heeded by every nation. It’s important to remember that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah were not connected with sexual immorality by the prophets. As Rev. Dr. Patricia Tull notes in her commentary on these chapters of Isaiah, “Ezekiel 16:49-50 describes Sodom’s guilt with some specificity: the city “had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things.” Again, I find the comparison to the United States as we approach 2020 to be inescapable.

In the time of Isaiah, as now, there would have been those who protested at the comparison between God’s people and the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. Then, as now, they would have pointed to their “faithfulness” in the external observation of worship. But Isaiah offered them, and us, no way out other than to confess that their worship was hollow when seen in the light of their actions. “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 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. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; 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. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. 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.” This last has a double meaning: not only are the hands of the “good people” of Israel full of the blood of their sacrifices, they are full of the blood of the poor whom they have not helped. And we need to make sure that we hear the depth of God’s revulsion to these sacrifices performed with dirty hands and stony hearts. J. Blake Couey of Gustavus Adolphus College points out that the verb in verse 11, “I have had enough of burnt offerings,” could also be translated “gorged out,” and that when Isaiah quotes Yahweh as saying, “Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates,” the literal reference is to nausea. Not to make light, but fans of Monty Python’s Flying Circus will remember the occasionally repeated line, “your kind makes me want to puke my guts out.” Yes, it really is that bad.

But then, Isaiah shows the way out, the way forward. I learned part of this next set of verses in the old King James Version, “Come, let us reason together…” Here’s the whole in the NRSV: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. 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. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” The problem, of course, is that when we, like the Children of Israel, set ourselves to do these things, we often backslide. We set out with the best of intentions, only to realize that our behavior has slowly degraded over time and we are right back to walking past the needy, distracting ourselves from what God calls us to do, participating in the structural injustices of our time.

I will skip over the next eleven verses. Even I can only take so much of the recitation of the sins of God’s people which applies to me as much as to those of Isaiah’s time. I will note that in the next section, Isaiah uses the language of female infidelity which has become problematic for those of us concerned about patriarchy in the Scriptures and in our religious practice. I take heart in what is pointed out by Rev. Dr. Patricia Tull: immediately after using the word “whore” to describe Jerusalem, Isaiah points out that those who have brought the city to this state are men – murderers (male), princes (male), and companions of thieves (male). For those of you who watched the recent Ken Burns series on “Country Music,” it’s good to remember, in the words made famous by Kitty Wells, “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels.”

McLaren chooses to end his look at Isaiah with the first five verses of chapter 2: “In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears

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into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" It is a mighty word of promise. No matter how bad things might look right now, Isaiah is saying, history will not end like this because God has the last word. If it isn't ok, it isn't the end. Peace will come. Joy will come. Love will return. We can hold on to hope. It's a pretty good message to take us into Advent next week.

Oh, but there is that other passage this morning, the one I read to begin with. Jesus has just called a tax collector, a collaborator with the occupying forces of the Romans, into his inner circle and is having dinner at his house! Not only is he dining in the home of this traitor, but other well-known sinners are there, too! The good people of the town throw a hissy fit. "When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" What they don't understand is that what they are seeing is a preview of the vision of Isaiah come to pass. Those who are not seen as the faithful ones of Israel are streaming to the presence of God, revealed in Jesus, just as Isaiah said, "...the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it." Jesus himself makes the connection with Isaiah's call to righteousness over ritual: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

My sisters and my brothers, what was good news for the outcasts of Galilee is good news for us as well. We cannot, if we are honest, deny that our spiritual journeys look a good deal like the salvation history of Israel. We, too, have gone off track, rebelled against God, found ourselves sick with the contagions of injustice, greed, selfishness, with the plagues of racism, sexism, ageism, class warfare, nationalism, and other human-made distinctions. But the Good News is always new! We have been given the great gift of God's love, the new wine that sparkles in our hearts and our eyes. We must be sure that we do not try to keep it bottled up, just for us, just for "the good people" who look like us, talk like us, worship like us, but rather that we keep that new wine of God's love in new, flexible skins, ready to change to accommodate the needs of our brothers and sisters, ready to share with all who come toward God and God's people to seek their place. We must be sure that our gatherings are like a wedding party, full of joy and the expectation of the bridegroom. God gloriously, mercifully loves God's creation. In Jesus, we see the loving hands of God reaching out to us all. The crimson stains of our sin-marked garments have been washed away. Let us remember that our faithful, loving service to Christ is our faithful, loving service to the world. We are beloved, just as all God's creation is beloved. Thanks be to God!