

“Faithful Obligations”

a sermon

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Isaiah 1:1, 10–20

It was not, without a doubt, the way to impress others. It was not, as Dale Carnegie might say, the way to win friends and influence people.

I’m talking about Isaiah, of course, and what he said. These were rough words. They were rude words. They were not winsome or kind, the things you say to make people like you.

Perhaps you noticed.

But Isaiah didn’t care about that. He had no interest in impressing others, nor in winning friends. Influencing people, sure, he had some interest in that, but it was not the most important thing. The most important thing was to honor God, and as such to speak the truth that God gave Isaiah to speak. God would take care of the rest.

That is what we see in this passage I read from the Bible. It’s the first prophecy from Isaiah that’s recorded in scripture, the first thing he would say, the opening statement from Isaiah to the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

Of course, Isaiah would say to us, if he were standing here with us, “Hold on, there! Wait one second! These were not *my* words; this was not *my* ‘opening statement.’ Griswold, how dare you call them *my* words. No, these were *God’s* words. They were what *God* gave me to say.”

Okay, Isaiah. I believe you. I’m sorry.

Isaiah spoke what God gave him to say. And what he spoke was rather blunt. These were not warm-and-comforting words. These were in-your-face words. They sound like the kind of thing you’d say to get someone’s attention, perhaps even to make them mad.

For what Isaiah does is make a comparison between the people of Jerusalem and the people of some other cities. It was a comparison intended to shock, and designed to provoke. For Isaiah compares Jerusalem with Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps you’ve heard of them. These were two cities notorious for their wickedness, cities that (as it is told in the book of Genesis) God destroyed because of their evil ways. And Isaiah speaks to his fellow Judahites in this way, comparing them to Sodom and Gomorrah, cities that, to every good little Jerusalemite boy and girl, represented evil, immorality, and just deserts.

Now, Isaiah’s comparison would have been shocking to his friends. It would have offended them terribly: to be compared to the people of those infamous cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. For Jerusalem was the home of God’s temple and the land of God’s people. The people of Judah and Jerusalem were the stewards of the sacrifices, the keepers of the Law, the children of Abraham, the subjects of David. This was the mighty nation that had been brought by God out of slavery and set in that land to be blessed forever. And here Isaiah compares Jerusalem to cities known, not for their love for God, but for their enmity with God; not for their holiness, but for their wickedness; not for their heritage

and pedigree, but for the story of the terrible end that had come upon them, a destruction that wiped them off the map and made them nothing but a memory, a byword, a symbol of the depths to which a society could stoop.

That's the comparison Isaiah was making. Like I said, he wasn't trying to make friends.

Yet Isaiah persists in the comparison. For he needs to get their attention. You see, things were not well in the land. The days of the mighty nation of Israel were long past, and now twilight was descending on the once powerful Judah. Jerusalem was surrounded by enemies, and the day was fast approaching when its inhabitants would be exiled or put to death.

It was not a happy time.

Isaiah speaks in and to such an unhappy time. It was not an occasion for pleasant words, nor was it time for polite and gentle words. Here, ironically, but necessarily, the loving, tender thing to do was to speak harshly and not tenderly. For God knew what the problem was with Jerusalem; God knew their plight, its origin and its destination. And so God has Isaiah speak to the people — firmly, directly, bluntly, rudely — with a message that leaves no room for doubt about why they were in trouble. God has Isaiah tell them that the problem, in short, was with *them*. They had turned their backs on God. They had forsaken God's ways and made a mockery of God's plan. And now they were getting what their behavior had warranted.

To hear this must have been a shock for the people. For, no doubt, they thought they had been doing fine, that they had done what God's law specified, satisfied its requirements. They had not abandoned God by going over to idols. They worshiped God in the temple, faithfully singing the psalms and offering the sacrifices. They were good! Weren't they?

And this is where God's message to the people gets very pointed. For God acknowledges their fine worship: the exceptional choirs, the gorgeous liturgies, the beautiful robes, the impeccably enacted sacrifices, the artful prayers. God acknowledges all these, as if to say, "yes, of course, I see that." But it's all by way of saying that these matter not a wit. In fact, these have become repulsive to God.

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.

But why, God? Why are these not good? Why do these no longer please you? — for these surely would be the questions immediately heard from the people in response to such harsh words. Why would God reject the worship that had all along been commanded, ultimately and supremely, by God?

And God right away answers such questions, such wonderings, with these words:

*New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation — I cannot endure solemn assemblies **with iniquity.***

“Iniquity” — that was the problem, the reason why God could not accept the worship of the people of Judah. Iniquity, evil, wrongdoing — these emptied worship of all significance, rendering it completely ineffective in its fundamental purpose, which was to please God, to bring honor and joy and pleasure to God.

Sure, the worship in the temple of Jerusalem in those days may have been exceptional for its elaborateness and enthusiasm. It may have made all who participated in it feel really swell. But not so with God. For God saw the hearts of those who worshiped on those holy days. More than that, God saw their *behavior* on all the other days of the week. And God knew that this worship, by these people, meant nothing.

But what was this iniquity? What was the wickedness that made the peoples’ worship inadequate? This is seen in the behavior God commands of them, in what God tells them they must instead do:

*cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*

Justice: that’s what the people lacked, it’s what they ignored. Their worship was enacted by those who were deaf to the cries of the suffering and blind to the tears of the sorrowing. It was worship that sought to hide hearts that had no concern for the oppressed, and lives that never did a thing for the orphan or the widow. For all their religion, they showed that all they cared about was themselves. For them, it seemed, religion was a merely private affair, a “day of the Lord” set aside from the hustle and bustle of life, a life in which they had it all and others had very little. But who cares about them?

Well, I’ll tell you who. God does. God cares for justice. God cares for the oppressed. God cares for orphans who need defending, God cares for widows who need advocating. And God cares, deeply, when those who claim the name of the Lord do not care. In fact, it grieves God.

That, apparently, is a surprise to some people. One famous political commentator today (whom, I am sure, some of you love, and some of you don’t) has said that social justice is “a perversion of the Gospel,” and that if your church or pastor mentions anything about social or economic justice you should run away.

I’m sorry he had said that.

You see, it’s abundantly clear that the word of the Lord that Isaiah delivered to the people insisted that there could be no true worship of God without living and acting with helpful regard for those who were most at risk in society, without being concerned for the social and economic plight of the weakest, those whose circumstances were made worse by societal structures that benefited solely those at the top.

Isaiah was telling his people, in other words, that they can’t expect God to be impressed when they ignore the injustices that surrounded them and of which they were enablers and beneficiaries, nor can they expect God to be pleased when they turn a blind eye to the creaking apparatus of a society that grinds down the poor and ossifies its inequities into unbreakable assumptions that this is just the way things are.

Against all that, the Lord spoke judgment. To all that, the Lord responded with condemnation. “Away with these feasts, they have become repulsive to me.”

But in that judgment and condemnation was also an invitation to change, to reject those false ways:

*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.*

It was, in other words, an invitation to be faithful to God in how they acted toward others, a gracious command to show obedience to God on the outside, in their actions toward others, on every day of the week. For God can't stand it when worship is disconnected from real life. It is an offense to God when religion ignores the injustices around us. The message of God delivered by Isaiah to his neighbors long ago is a message that rejects our own comfortable ideas of faith as a strictly private matter. Which is to say that Isaiah speaks to us, too.

Here's the thing: concern for justice; concern for the plight of the poor and homeless; taking action, as believers in God, as disciples of Jesus Christ — these are not a corruption of the Good News of that same Jesus. These are an obligation Christians take on as an expression of their faith in Jesus. It is a faithful obligation.

And that's because the rejection of a merely private, one-day-only expression of religion runs throughout the Bible and was supremely demonstrated by Jesus. He had compassion on the poor and downtrodden, and he was harsh on the powerful who abused their power in ways that made the poor suffer, these same powerful ones who then took that suffering as supposed "evidence" that God loved the poor less and them more.

Jesus rejected such nonsense. He worked against it, and suffered because of it, and he rose to conquer it. And he calls us to have a share in all that he does: the working, the suffering, the conquering. He calls us, and empowers us, to live faithful lives every day, lives that seek to make connections with the real world in all its corruption and injustice, to do all this as a faithful obligation.

You see, this is the reason why we, as a congregation, support things like the Open Door Mission, and the Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network (our ministry to homeless families), and share our talents with the needy in Orland, Maine. We don't do this as a distraction from our faith. We do this as an *expression* of our faith.

Sure, not all of us can do the work. We do not all have the opportunity or strength or talent or time to go. But all of us can pray for and encourage and celebrate with those of us among us who can and do. We can become better informed and more aware of the struggles that people around us endure. We can seek God's wisdom regarding those struggles and issues. We can do these things. In fact, we *must* do these things. We have that obligation, each of us do, a faithful obligation: to bring glory to God by living our faith each day of the week, seeking its connection with all facets of life.

May God give us the grace to take on, joyfully, those faithful obligations that bring honor to Christ Jesus and blessing to the weakest among us.