

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20
August 8, 2010

South Plains

What God Wants On Sunday

Sometimes unpleasant things need to be spoken aloud, harsh words, words that offend and attack what we assumed to be the normal way of life. That's the case with Isaiah, chapter one. The prophet is criticizing the worship of the people of God. Sacrifices, offerings, incense, festivals and the blood of lambs all fall under judgment. "I've had enough of burnt offerings," says the Lord in verse eleven. Since South Plains does not have an altar where we sacrifice animals and we don't burn incense, it would be easy for us to hear these verses as a condemnation of the Jews, a critique that has nothing to do with us. But we ignore the prophets of the Old Testament at our peril. In the providence of God their words are meant for us also.

Worship of the living God is inherently dangerous. It's like building a campfire in the Shenandoah National Forest. We want the warmth of the fire for cooking, for comfort and light. But, if we're careless, the flames will at best burn us, and in the worst case scenario they will consume the whole forest, including the campers. Shortly after I arrived at South Plains, one of you pointed out that we did not have an invocation in our order of worship. So, we now begin worship every Sunday by invoking the presence of God, praying that the Lord will warm our souls, comfort our sorrows and enlighten our

way. But, if worship becomes careless and superficial, the judgment of a righteous God will burn.

That's what had happened in the eighth century BC when Isaiah was alive. Prosperity had made people and priests complacent. They went through the motions of worship every Sabbath. They had a beautiful sanctuary, a trained cadre of priests and a well-oiled system for bringing sacrifices and offerings to worship. What could be wrong?

What was wrong turned out to be so simple that no one noticed it was missing. They had stopped listening for the word of the Lord. Therefore the prophecy of Isaiah begins with "Hear the word of the Lord, your rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah (1:10)." Sodom and Gomorrah had long since disappeared by Isaiah's time, but everyone remembered the story of their immorality and divine destruction. When the Lord calls the leaders of Israel, "rulers of Sodom... people of Gomorrah," it was a deliberate insult, the way some people call others communist or Nazi today.

Since we're talking about hearing, I can report that I have had my hearing tested, and I passed the test. But the technician had a word of advice for anyone speaking to me or any man. I'm told by this professional that men don't listen. She said, "You have to get a man's attention before you start speaking." The Lord called his people "Sodom and Gomorrah" to get their attention.

That's the hardest part of worship, giving God our attention. We have so many other things that require our attention and energy. When we come into the sanctuary, our minds begin to wander back to the office or the school or the children or the report we got from the doctor, a hundred distractions assail us. I'm sure the same problem existed for the people of ancient Israel. So the prophet hurls this insult about Sodom and Gomorrah to get their attention.

If the problem for Israel were nothing more than focus, it would have been easy to fix. The priest might have worn a different robe or poured a little kerosene on the sacrificial fire. It was more serious because the distractions were hiding the truth, both the truth about God and about the people. There's nothing inherently wrong with sacrifices, incense, offerings and the blood of lambs. In fact they are the very elements of worship God required in the Old Testament. The problem with their worship was that these details were peripheral and they distracted from the main point and purpose of gathering in God's presence.

At the heart of worship then and now are two principles. The most important is that worship needs to reflect the character of God. This means listening to the word of the Lord so that whatever peripheral details are used in worship, paraments, hymns, announcements, etc, those details should point unmistakably to the God at the center of our attention. The second principle follows

suit. Everything we say and do needs to reflect the character of the worshipers, who we really are.

After the long diatribe against the forms of worship, the prophet finally turns in verse 16 to the remedy:

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.

Again and again in the Old Testament, the Lord is doing good, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, and defending the poor; he expects the same from us:

[doing good] For the Lord is good;
His steadfast love endures forever...(Ps. 100:5).

[justice] What does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness... (Mic 6:8).

[rescue] I am the Lord your God who brought you
out of the house of slavery (Ex 20:2).

[orphans and widows] You shall not gather... the
fallen grapes... you shall leave them for the poor (Lev
19:10).

What the Lord wants on Sunday is a people who
will listen to the word of the Lord, take it to heart and

imitate God in their lives the other six days of the week. Last Sunday we wanted to buy some fresh peaches, but when I called the orchard they said they had closed the packing shed for the day. My voice revealed my disappointment. The owner added quickly, "But, the honor system is still in place." At the packing shed, we chose the fruit ourselves, measured it in the baskets provided, calculated our bill by the prices posted, and left the correct amount in the coffee can. The owner of that orchard trusted that worship on Sunday translated into honesty when he was closed.

There's an automobile commercial on TV these days that says, "The things we make, make us." The message intends to reassure us that they make a good product, and therefore they are good Americans who deserve our business. We might adapt that slogan to say that the worship we make, makes us. And, if our Sunday worship does not shape our lives the other six days of the week, we have dishonored God and made ourselves liable to judgment.

Not too long ago, someone coined the phrase "worship wars" to describe the conflict over so-called traditional worship and so-called contemporary worship. The titles are terrible misnomers although I confess my inability to come up with anything better to designate the opposing sides. The argument is a distraction. Conflict over worship resolves itself when our attention centers on God and our manner of worship throws the spotlight not on what we do in the sanctuary, but on what God is doing

in the world to pursue justice, do good, and help orphans, widows and poor people in general. The indictment of Isaiah speaks to us as surely as it spoke to ancient Israel. How does Isaiah speak to us today?

We strive to make offerings to God that look good even when they involve no real sacrifice on our part, desiring the approval of our peers all too often in place of any real gifts we might have to give. We Presbyterians like pretty things in worship, especially things that add to the solemnity and dignity of Sunday in a Presbyterian church. Too often we are simply trying to shore up our own dignity, ignoring the dignity and worth of the Lord we come to honor. Our festivals in the church – Christmas and Easter - reflect our culture as much as they point to God's presence in Christ.

Finally and frighteningly, the prophet says, our "hands are full of blood," according to the prophet. Does he mean our wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Korea and World War II? Or does he refer to the thousands of children dying of starvation every day? Or perhaps to victims of accidents that could have been prevented by another safety check, or by a little more attention to what we're doing?

As harsh as this passage is, it concludes with an invitation: "Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord." Amazingly, God wants to talk with us.

“Come, let us reason together,” says the older translation. And, so we come to worship on Sunday talking out our faith with each other, listening for the word of the Lord in the readings, in the hymns and prayers. We come trusting in the promise of Jesus that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there. At our best, we come in the confidence that the Holy Spirit is helping us hear a particular word intended for each of us.

God wants our Sunday worship to be tied so tightly to Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday that the mental traffic between this hour and the other six days of the week never stops. God wants us always connecting the dots between work and justice, between politics and the oppressed of the earth, between our neighbors and the poor.

We don't always succeed, of course. Thus, our worship opens with a confession, a plea for mercy and the assurance of God's forgiveness. And, when we worship well, we leave the sanctuary wondering at the character of God reflected in who we are. That's what God wants.