

"Learn, Seek, Rescue, Defend, Plead"

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Isaiah 1: 10-20

Luke 12: 32-40

Last week, the First Testament and Gospel lectionary readings went galloping in different directions, this week they are going down parallel paths, almost holding hands.

The prophet Isaiah started writing in the middle of the 8th Century B.C.E. and it seems clear that as a spokesperson for God that religion had deteriorated from active, passionate worship to a sense of "my animal sacrifice is bigger and more expensive than your sacrifice."

The problem with the reading is that it almost seems to be saying, don't bother to worship—I'm not listening. Verses 14 & 15 say to the effect: "Your appointed festivals...have become a burden to me. ...Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen..."

What is happening here? This is one of the mischief making Scripture readings that have been used over the years for anti-Semitic purposes.

As you know, with selected omissions and inappropriate emphasis most readings can be bent and interpreted to support a particular point of view. But clearly, God is neither anti-Semitic nor against people attending worship.

The practice of animal sacrifice was big in those days—lambs, goats, rams, and bulls—a very bloody business. These verses say nothing about the priests who hauled the carcasses away, cooked the meat and ate it. It would appear that the priests were having as much animal protein as they could ingest.

In Isaiah, at least, God had quite a bit to say about pretended piousness, sanctimonious sacrifices, and flippant festivals. God was demanding sincerity not only in the worship service but also in the lives of the people.

In the history of the prophets, they had been calling for the same thing—don't buy expensive indulgences meant to keep the priests rich and to show off your phony piousness; use your money to help others and don't make excess profits for yourself off the backs of the poor.

In last week's gospel reading concerning the parable of the rich farmer who had more wealth than he needed. He wanted to build additional storage space so he didn't lose a

grain of profit and Jesus asked what good all those riches will mean when he is to be called to account by God that very night?

I heard a story about values recently that I want to inject here. It's a true story from Fred Craddock about a missionary couple that lived in China with their two small children. Sometime after the Communists took over, they wanted to return to the US but they were not allowed to. One day, soldiers showed up and told them they could leave but they were only allowed to take along two hundred pounds and so the family of four began to negotiate which of their possessions they would take—it was very difficult because they had been in China for some time and had many items that were important to them—a valuable vase, a new typewriter, a jade statue. They finally got it down after they had weighed and reweighed everything they felt they could not part with.

When the soldiers returned, they asked the couple if they had weighed everything and they confirmed they had. Then one of the soldiers said, "Have you weighed the children?"

They threw out everything they owned. It was no problem to know what was really important.

And we know what is important in our lives.

The basic message from God has not changed. In fact, in Isaiah verse 17, God tells us what is expected of us: Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow. What clear marching orders these are!

I wonder if you are like me. I read about injustice, and I shake my head; an anchor person on radio or TV tells me about genocide in Africa; an article in *Business Week* or *Harper's* or *Time* informs me that the divide in the world between the rich and the poor is growing and some of it is due to price supports for US farmers that enables them to undercut Third World farm prices. I am overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem and turn the page or change the station.

That is not what God put us here for, gave us intelligence and a sense of compassion. God expects us to take care of other human beings, nature and the planet—all of God's creation.

The Hebrews ignored the warnings from the prophets and they suffered for it. They were bloodied in battle, they were invaded many times by powerful marauding armies

that showed no mercy; they were exiled to Babylon and again conquered by large war machine nations—first Greece and then Rome, which stayed for a couple of centuries.

As an aside, isn't it interesting that while the Greeks were just as frightening as any other invader in the Middle East, they left more than they took for among the educated Jews and others in the region, the preferential language of society became Greek and other aspects of the life of the educated-- primarily the rich--were Hellenized—in art, literature, philosophy—most everything except their basic religion.

The Egyptian, Ptolemy II the founder of the great library at Alexandria was one of the many outside rulers of the Hebrews; he had the Jewish bible translated into Greek in the Third Century B.C.E. Hebrew, the language of the Torah, faded in importance so that only the Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees knew it.

Jesus, spoke Aramaic and probably knew very little Hebrew—and no Greek for he was raised by a working class family who needed him to work.

Jesus was, of course, one of the last prophets, but he was much more than a prophet for he came not just to warn us and to teach us new ways to worship, but to save us and of course, that is why we are gathered here today.

I mentioned earlier that both the lectionary texts for today ran parallel for while Isaiah coached us on how to truly worship God, Luke counsels us on being alert to God's presence. If we are ready when God comes to us and we accept God immediately, God will reward our faithfulness.

Luke reminds us that Jesus, who refers to himself as the Son of Man, is coming back for us. When, we don't know; not even Jesus knew when. He told his disciples that it would be soon, but we should remember that God's time and ours are different. Soon could be tomorrow or in a thousand years.

I cannot help but think of the people driving home from work in Minneapolis a couple of weeks ago who were crossing the same bridge at the same time that they had for years. And in an instant, their world collapsed—no warning, no alert. Were they ready to be called?

So how are we supposed to live as God expects us? Tune in, for one thing. Almost every week about this time someone up here is giving you advice on how to do just that. Let me be no exception. Pray to God and love your neighbor.

This church has a long history of mission projects. When I joined here, the pastor had organized mission trips into the city to meet with folks living on 127th Street, bring clothes and food and also help them with the garden they were tending—have lunch together. Later, we invited children from Harlem to come up here and live with families for a week or more. And now, more than 30 years later, we still have a strong connection to that street and the children of the adults that lived there.

So what are our opportunities for hands-on mission? The Midnight Run; Habitat for Humanity, but not every one can swing a hammer or stay up to three in the morning. We also collect food at Stop and Shop for People to People at Thanksgiving.

Remembering last week's Gospel lesson at the New Hempstead Presbyterian Church where I preached, we talked about how the rich farmer in the Gospel reading, failed to leave gleanings for the poor. Gleanings are odd pieces of grain or produce that farmers left for hungry people to forage after the harvest was in.

There is a modern Gleanings project headquartered in Virginia--church groups that go to farms after the harvest and gather the leftover crops and give them to the poor. The closest one is in Oswego, NY probably too far, but what a wonderful idea.

How you respond to God suggestion and command to love thy neighbor is up to you; the church can offer you ways to do that, but it takes commitment. Here is Isaiah with a 21st Century twist:

Resist the temptation to think that world problems are someone else's problems.

Learn how to reach out to our neighbors by joining Bread for the World in their fight to stop world hunger and malnutrition.

Seek creative ways to stand up for the poor. The Tallahassee project for example is a consortium of different denomination churches that band together to write letters, attend rallies and in other ways attempt to influence laws aimed at helping the poor and disenfranchised in Florida.

Rescue unfairly imprisoned political prisoners around the world by writing letters for Amnesty International.

Defend our civil liberties by writing or calling your representatives in congress.

Plead for aid to Africa to stop genocide, eliminate river blindness and educate people about stopping the spread of AIDS.

There are many ways to help implement Jesus' vision for social justice in the world beyond giving money. You are an instrument for spreading the peace of Christ. The

right time to start is now. Amen.