

Rev. Gabriel Lawrence  
Pentecost 9, Year C  
August 10, 2025  
St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights, OH

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

As the priest for worship at St. Paul's, I have to admit that the words we heard from the prophet Isaiah this morning did not quite give me the warm and fuzzies. Isaiah's words were direct and condemning. And even if Isaiah's words were originally spoken and then written for a people in a different time and place than ours, his words can still be hard to hear- and especially when they partially reference the whole reason we have gathered today and gather every week, to worship. Throughout the whole summer, while listening to the first reading being read by our lectors (the readings have on more than one occasion contained some harsh prophetic words), two thoughts have crossed my mind: The first, "are we in the season after Pentecost, or have some readings from the penitential season of Lent accidentally snuck into our lectionary?" The second thought I've had this summer when listening to these first readings from the prophets being read has been, "What did the prophet just say!?" Indeed, on at least one occasion this summer when we had guests with us for some baptisms, we have used a different translation than usual so as to avoid the hearing of shocking words that, out of context, could be offensive. But this morning, I want us to approach Isaiah's words, even if they might be hard to hear, with some historical and cultural background, and in so doing, see if the prophet's words might still have a message for us today, thousands of years after they were originally spoken.

If we were to break down Isaiah's words from this morning's first lesson into three parts, we might see this text from the first chapter of the Book of Isaiah as a condemnation, a command, and a promise. To begin, Isaiah lays into the people of Judah and Jerusalem, criticizing their worship. Speaking for God, he says, "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." Wow. After this condemnation, we then hear a command, and this command is directly related to the condemnation. Again, speaking for God, Isaiah says, "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." With this condemnation and command tied together, we can deduce that God was not happy with the worship that the people of Judah and Jerusalem were offering precisely because, while the worship may have been according to the rubrics and customs, while incense and sacrifices were being offered in the temple, the people were not seeking justice. They were not relieving the burden of the oppressed. They were not defending the orphan. They were not pleading for the widow. Perhaps in their prayers that accompanied their incense and sacrifices they even prayed for the oppressed and the orphan and the widow. But, for God, that worship, those prayers, were null and void.

Isaiah even goes on to compare the people of Judah and Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah. And while this mention of these two cities are laden with references to a supposed sin of homosexuality, that incorrect reference is not the criticism here. References to Sodom and Gomorrah by the prophets were used as bywords for wickedness. Referencing these cities and comparing the people to them was the strongest possible way to condemn the actions of Judah and Jerusalem. Though references to Sodom and Gomorrah have become incorrectly synonymous with homosexuality, we hear from another prophet, Ezekiel, who tells us what the real sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were. Ezekiel says, "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." The real sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were greed, injustice, and a glaring absence of hospitality.

At its core, Isaiah's words we hear this morning reminded the people of Judah and Jerusalem, and, yes, even us on this day thousands of years later, that our worship is not pleasing to God if it does not lead to and is not accompanied by action. Our worship much be active. Our prayers and hymns and sermons and anthems and sacraments and rituals are acceptable to God if our worship is also accompanied by our seeking of justice, relieving the burden of the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow. Isaiah's words today remind us that our faith and the worship we offer is not just about our individual relationship with God, but that God is concerned with how we order our lives collectively as a society and how that ordering meets the needs of every single person within our society. Our faith must be active, and our faith must be concerned for how our systems of order ensure not only that the hungry are fed, but how the systems in place that perpetuate the plight of the poor are replaced with systems that do not leave room for a belly to go without food. It is not enough for us to gather here on this day to offer worship. We must also be actively putting our feet to our prayers and building up the Kingdom of God one brick of justice at a time.

And, finally, to return to Isaiah's words- they don't end with the condemnation or the command. They end with a promise. One more time, Isaiah speaks for God and says, "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." If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. This phrase. I think it gets at the heart of the reality that, as poet Maya Angelou put it: "The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free." This action to which Isaiah calls us- seeking of justice, relieving the burden of the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow- it situates us properly within community. When we seek that justice and relieve that burden and defend and plead for the helpless, we also secure for ourselves justice and relief and defense. And then we can gather as the people of God and offer worthy sacrifices, worthy hymns, worthy sacraments, worthy rituals as we build up the reign of God and bring God's Kingdom just a little closer to earth. Beloved, this is our calling, and this is our worship.