**Isaiah 1:1-4, 10-20**

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

 2 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.

 3 The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

 4 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!

Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

 11 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.

 12 When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more;

 13 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.

 14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

 15 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.

 16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

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

 18 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.

 19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;

 20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

**Matthew 25:31-46**

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

 44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

 45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

**Sermon –**

So, we are starting a new series today, and why I came up with it or agreed to it, who knows? Guess because I asked the question on “what’s next”, and Isaiah was the outcome…

A little background…. Isaiah was a prophet in the Old Testament, roughly during the last half of the 8th century before Christ. And just before you think that this has absolutely nothing to do with us, the context in which Isaiah was written is surprisingly similar to ours; the situations he describes, might as well have occurred yesterday.

It was a time of trouble for Israel, who got blasted by the Assyrians, and somehow Judah evaded the worst of it by some wheeling and dealing. And Isaiah is the prophet that made sure that Judah was aware that God was not at all pleased with them anymore, even though they are his chosen people. He does not win many accolades for this, to be sure; but he also comes with more than just accusation, as we will see as we move through Isaiah… He brings good news – good news of restored relationships, forgiveness of sins and a future that is full of life and light.

Isaiah, in the first chapter, sounds like he is on a rampage – or maybe rather God – doesn’t sound like a soothsayer at all. Maybe that’s why I had second thoughts about all this. God, in fact, is reaming the people of Judah out; and his biggest problem is their worship. Maybe it is something akin to what we hear today when it is said: “If that’s what Christianity is about, I’m not interested”? Sad thing is that many people say that today… Of the 69% of Americans that call themselves Christian, only a little more than a third attend Church regularly.

Let’s be honest. Look at the way we behave, the way we relate to one another. We’re often not the best ambassadors for Jesus Christ. It’s not a new problem. These numbers are shockingly low among millennials – 36% call themselves “nones”. The reasons, you ask? Here are a few: The Church is not relevant for day-to-day life, they are tired of the routine, the Church has not engaged them in their calling, God is missing in the church, helping the poor is not a priority, the people are hypocritical, and organized religious groups as more divisive than uniting. This is hurtful!!!

I was wondering if this is how God felt when he went off on this rampage. God reams out the Israelites for thinking that they can honor Him while mistreating the most vulnerable of His people. He calls them rebellious, not knowing God, sinful, corrupt, forsaken the Lord, and despising the Holy One. The people are accused of trusting in the trappings of worship when they should be seeking justice and caring for the oppressed. They are accused of specific unjust economic, judicial, and social activities. And he does all this in a way that is reminiscent of a court scene, where he calls heavens and earth as his witnesses.

Nothing the Judeans are doing in the temple, he insists, pleases the Lord. In fact, Isaiah announces, all of it is disgusting and, in fact, disturbing to the God to whom it’s supposedly offered. “Enough already. Stop in the name of love!” God has had it “up to here” with your token expressions of devotion. It is futile. God could care less about your faint praise. Your festivals wear God slick and weigh God down. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right.

Their worship has gotten in the way of what YHWH has called them to be and do. For Isaiah, as for Amos and Hosea and Micah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, worship that does not lead to justice in the community is just not worship of YHWH at all!

Isaiah brings the Word of God for the people of God in clear and no uncertain terms, “Your wordy prayers are like jabber to me. I will not listen. Your prayers are well rehearsed but hardly well-versed. So much, ‘Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!!’” All this while you “have blood on your hands”; the blood of not “relieving the oppressed, vindicating the orphan, and pleading for the widow”, by in some way either being complicit, or just not standing up for them.

 What might seem like a radical, unreasonable standard for justice on the part of Isaiah is corroborated by Jesus whose most vivid accounts of damnation come in parables about people privilege neglecting the oppressed: the rich man who ignores Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 and the goats who never love Christ in “the least of these” in Matthew 25.

God speaks what we refuse to hear. God’s anger is the anger of those we fail to see. Yahweh calls us out on our lack of activism for the oppressed and our failure to find relief for the oppressed.

We have acclimated to an account of justice in which “charity” is a bonus, when what God has to say in Isaiah 1 is that we are mocking Him to sing “Worthy is the lamb” if it does not compel us to seek out the welfare of those who are being crucified today. In other words, the existence of justice and righteousness is to be measured by whether the weakest and most vulnerable members of a society are being attended to and provided for.

God does not need our bulls or incense. He does not need our testimony of how much He has blessed us or our thunderous shouts of “God is good!” He does not need us to raise our hands and close our eyes when we praise Him. *We*need to do these things insofar as they transform us into vessels and vassals of God’s mercy, which is not something held in dialectic tension with God’s justice but is rather the means by which He accomplishes justice. What makes worship acceptable to God is not the motions we perform in the sanctuary, but the mission we pursue in the world -- in a word, *justice*.

To the extent that the voices we’ve lifted in song have hurt others, our worship angers God. The prophet implies that to the extent that we’ve gained the money we’ve offered God in immoral ways, it angers God. To the extent that pastors have failed to practice what we’ve preached, we’ve angered God. You can stretch that nationally. After all, some hands raised in prayer have also bound Africans in chains and chased Native Americans off their lands. Some voices raised in song have spoken about adherents of other religions as if they were demons. Some hands bringing offerings have been those that wrote laws to cause apartheid.

This is ominous, because, as Will Willimon, reflecting on our text’s message, says, “The test for what we do here from eleven until noon is what we do out there Monday through Saturday.” And the Church’s track record is not the best in the world. We have closed the doors on those who are different… by race, by sexual orientation, by ethnicity, by social status, by education…So how will the Lord ever accept our own flawed worship? What hope do you and I have that God will ever answer our prayers?

Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow, God says. That is the new commandment we have from God - Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. There is no need for more words from us, more half-baked promises that we will try to do our best. God provides the curious question: “Is your best going to do justice or not?”

And then God makes a final invitation that might be translated, "Come now, let us correct the situation" – let us reason together – let us talk. God invites us to come, to turn, to change… a possibility that is grounded in God's willingness to forgive. God tells us that if we allow ourselves to be judged, to recognize that we have not loved as he has first loved, to take serious the care we give to the least of these without judgment, then worship can be turned into what it is meant to be: a place where our sins are washed away and we become white as snow.

 “Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow”, a trade worth taking every time. Thankfully, then, that God has done everything necessary to scrub God’s adopted sons and daughters clean. God sent God’s only Son to live and die among us. In his life-long suffering, but especially on the cross, Jesus Christ offered the complete and completed sacrifice for our forgiveness. Through his blood we become white as snow, as though we are morally spotless before God. And this mercy, shown to us, empowers us to do what God requires…

Christ followers are called to be “all in.” To be all in in our worship as far as connecting our Sundays to our daily lives. To take the mercy we have been shown onto the streets. By feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoner, by standing up for the oppressed, the widow the orphan, and by welcoming the alien. And not just in words, but in our deeds. We need to show that world that we ARE the church – not in rituals, but in sharing God’s love – in doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God.