

Prophet Margins: Week 6
“Learn to do Good”

Scriptures: Luke 12:32-40, Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

For the past 5 weeks we have been working through some of the Old Testament prophets. So far we have heard from Amos and Hosea and today we will take a look at the opening chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah. One thing these three all have in common is they are basically giving warnings to the Israelites to quit their wicked ways and return to the God who only wants the best for them if they will just repent and be forgiven. If you have your Bibles or your Bible app, turn to Isaiah 1. We will be reading the first verse and then verses 10-20.

Did you notice the names of the kings in the opening verse? Isaiah wasn't just a short-term prophet; he was a prophet for around 60 years and he outlasted 4 different kings, all of them described in other scriptures as evil. Prophecy is one of those preaching styles people want to hear occasionally hoping for a prediction of something they want to be coming true. The Israelites have had enough of Amos and Hosea and their dire prophecies of destruction and call to repentance. They are hoping this new prophet has a better prophecy. Isaiah doesn't waste any time getting right into the matter. Can you picture the crowd as Isaiah begins his message? In verse 10, it is a powerful opening: “Hear the Word of the Lord” – remember how often Moses said that?

At first people listen, then there is some uncomfortable squirming, and then probably some outright hostility after addressing them as “you rulers of Sodom....you people of Gomorrah!” – they all knew the story about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as the people continuing in the evil ways and failing to repent – and that was an outright insult and probably resulted in the “run him out of town on the rail” reaction. But the vision that God gave Isaiah is clear. The consequences of failure to repent are severe and there really is no time to waste. Prophecy is urgent and it is disturbing because it is a ministry of warning.

The rest of the passage is a warning to the Israelites. Outwardly a large number were still very religious and following the strict instructions laid out in Leviticus and Deuteronomy for worship and the sacrifices made as part of worship. But the reality is God had enough of the “going through the motions” of being outwardly faithful on the Sabbath and other festival days and no evidence of being inwardly, in-the-heart faithful the other six days of the week. Isaiah delivers God's message loud and clear in verses 16 and 17: “Take your evil deeds out of my sight! **Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!** Seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

In other words, work for the greater good and make room at the table for everyone because there is enough for all, not just you and those who think like you, act like you, and share the same lifestyle you do. All are created in God's image and all have a place in God's kingdom. And there is an urgency to that because we don't know when Christ is coming again and we need to be ready to be held accountable like the servants in the parable Joetta read from Luke. As followers of Christ, we are not to work toward accumulating earthly treasure but to use the gifts and talents given to us to seek justice and bring hope and healing to a hurting world.

Isaiah wasn't just prophesying to the Israelites; he is speaking to us as well. When we take the membership vows in the United Methodist Church, we are asked to respond to three questions:

1. Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?
2. Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?
3. Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?

Answering "I do" to each of these questions is committing to having a seven day a week faith from the heart and not just a "It's Sunday so I should show up for church" religion.

When the people of the church commit to sincere worship and experience God in this way, the world can be changed. I have seen it first hand and learned more about what it means to be a Christian from people outside the walls of this church, not in it. The first was in South Africa. I am not sure how familiar you are with the history of South Africa, but colonization by the Dutch and later the British led to a government system in which the white minority ruled with an oppressive hand over the native majority. The apartheid system had three classes of people: White, colored, and black. "Colored" were people of Indian descent who served as civil servants under the British and were still considered superior to the black majority. The system oppressed the black majority in every way possible. Cape Town is divided into different numbered districts and in District 6, the entire black population was forcibly removed to a shanty township of the edge of town and the district bulldozed to the ground on the pretext that the land was needed for new industry, but that was a lie. Standard living conditions in the black townships was no indoor plumbing, one well serving the entire township, and homes patched together from cardboard, tin sheets, canvas tarps, and any other usable material. Without transportation to go into the city to work, there was no work and very little income other than making items for the tourist trade to sell by the side of the road. I had never seen such extreme poverty, but the one thing that many took hope in was the church and their faith. The black churches were places of sincere worship and

prayers for God to bring justice. For many years the white church kept a blind, but uncomfortable, eye on the injustice of the system.

When leaders such as Desmond Tutu were called to the role of prophet to speak out and demonstrate peacefully for the end of the apartheid system and the release of Nelson Mandela and other opponents of apartheid, the world took notice. And debated. In the US, they were labeled Communists and Congress debated about sanctions. Churches in South Africa, both white and black, led the protests and the United Methodist Church members in the U.S started pressuring Congress to place sanctions; individuals divested themselves of stock in companies that were continuing to do business in South Africa and things started to change. One of the white pastoral couples we stayed with had both done jail time for participating in a protest march and they had no regrets about standing up for the oppressed. When the elections were held and Nelson Mandela was elected, it was a peaceful transition and not a civil war and bloodbath that could have torn the country apart. When we visited the prison on Robbin Island where Mandela had been imprisoned, it was a humbling experience. All of the guides were former prisoners. When ours found out we were an American United Methodist Church group, he shook our hands and thanked each of us for standing with them to bring an end to their imprisonment.

One of the things someone in our group noticed was that in the several churches we worshiped in, there was a Christian flag but no South African Flag. When asked about it, the pastor was quite blunt: “When the flag of the country is in the sanctuary, your allegiance is no longer to God and the church has relinquished its prophetic role to speak against injustice.” I have thought about that a lot and it bothers me to see some people trying to wrap faith up in an American flag and fail to call out the KKK and other hate groups that use “Christian” in their names for what they are. If the church does not take its prophetic calling seriously, there are consequences. In 2018, the New York Times carried an article about the church organist in Herxheim, Germany who refused to play for services after finding out there was a bell in the tower inscribed with a swastika and “Everything for the Fatherland”. At least two dozen other churches found that they had the same bells; most removed them, some did not. What if the churches in 1934 had not accepted the bells but accepted their prophetic role and stopped the evil?

Evil spreads insidiously. We need to recognize the sense of urgency Isaiah is conveying in the last three verses of our text. God is willing and eager to “forgive and forget” – “Come, now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” Then to remove any doubt, the closing part of the verse is the authoritative phrase, “For the mouth of the LORD has

spoken.” Not Isaiah has said it, but God has said it. God is inviting us; be willing and obedient, *stop doing wrong, learn to do right* . It is not enough to stop doing wrong, but we need to learn to do right. Learning to do right is putting sincere Sunday worship into heart-felt faith action the other six days of the week. On one of the work trips to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, we had a lot more profound faith moments. We were working in the Lower 9th Ward, and it was heart-breaking devastation. We were working on two different projects, one was an elderly woman, Miss Dee's, house and part of the group was working on a gentleman's barbershop. Next door to Miss Dee was a man who had worked at NASA in Chalmette until he suffered a stroke and had to retire on disability. Every day he would sit on the porch from the time we arrived until we were ready to leave. Most days our crew was all women; Joetta was a good painter on that trip! We would visit when we took a break or had lunch, he would brag about Drew Brees and the Saints, and we would try to brag on the Bengals and Cowboys. We enjoyed spending time with him, but I was surprised when we teased him a little about watching over us that he responded pretty seriously that was exactly what he was doing. He said that no women, let alone white women, would have been in that neighborhood without a man to watch over them. That had never occurred to us (or at least not to me); it was more important to meet the need of an elderly displaced woman who wanted back in the only home she had known for over 50 years. Our new friend was meeting a need we didn't even know we had. When the other group finished up the barber's shop and presented him with a new set of barbering tools and equipment, he was pretty emotional. What he told the group was revealing; “I never thought I would call a white man brother, but I can now because we are brothers in Christ.” What does that say about the need to learn to do good? If people are to learn to do good, someone needs to teach them. That is us – the church.

When the Master returns, no matter what time of day or night will we have accepted God's invitation to come reason together? Will we be ready to open the door of our hearts when he knocks and be invited to the table he has prepared for all those who have responded to his call? Every week we pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Do we believe that?

Let us pray:

God of Redemption, You call us to wash ourselves clean, so that our transgressions fall away. May we cease doing evil, learn to do good, and seek justice.

You call us to rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.

May we not forget these responsibilities you've set before us.

We are grateful for the reminder from the prophet Isaiah that, though our sins are like scarlet, you'll make us like snow!

Even though they are red like crimson, you make them like wool!

May we be obedient and willing followers, pleasing unto you.

Amen.