

Empty Words of Praise
A Sermon on Isaiah 1:1-20
Proper 14
August 7, 2022

Introduction

When we ask ourselves why church attendance has plummeted in the last 50 years, we may just find that people are seeing the same thing that Isaiah saw. People believe that Christians are hypocritical. Too many Christians go to worship and sing praise songs, lifting their hands in praise to God, but they turn their backs on the most vulnerable people in society. When Christians do get involved in social issues, their motivation seems to come from partisan politics instead of from following Jesus.

I am not throwing stones at all other churches. Some churches do love their neighbor and do minister to the least of these. But a lot don't. And people can see that, especially young people. They may want to participate in the mission of the church, but they have little interest in attending worship.

First Move: The Gap Between Praise and Practice

There is a gap between praise and practice. Until we close that gap, the church will continue to decline.

People worship God on Sunday morning but ignore God's teaching as soon as they leave the church and do nothing to help build the kingdom. People wear their faith on their sleeves or on bumper stickers or on social media posts instead of in their hearts. These are empty words; they are praising their piety instead of praising God.

People outside the church can see the disconnect. They see Christians ignoring the least of these. They don't see Christ at work in the lives of Christians. If they could, our churches would be full.

Some faux Christians like to call America a Christian nation. They believe in American exceptionalism and see America as a city on a hill. I disagree with much of that, but to the extent that any of it is true, the faux Christians fail to recognize that election carries responsibility. God chose Israel to be a blessing to the nations. God expected Israel to be a model to other nations about how to enter into authentic community with God and neighbor. All the nations would stream to God's holy mountain and worship God when they saw the witness of Israel. God was disappointed with Israel when it failed to live up to God's expectations; God sent

prophets to Israel and urged the kings and the people to repent. If you are a city on a hill, no one is going to be drawn to it unless they admire the way people treat each other there.

Many churches minister to the poor, but their ministry is charity not justice. They have food kitchens and clothing pantries. They give meals and clothing to the poor. That is a good thing. When a man is drowning, throw him a life preserver. But charity does nothing to change an unjust economic system. It can actually reinforce it. The churches become the patrons of the poor, creating a dependency relationship.

Justice work is carrying out distributive justice and restorative justice. Distributive justice helps to change the distribution of goods and services so that they are shared more equally. The model is the household where all members of the household share the same goods and services. One son does not get more food or better food than another son. Restorative justice is restoring broken relationships, holding the sinner accountable to show remorse and make restitution, then forgiving sin by bringing the offender back into community.

We have two extremes. On one hand we have churches who are not doing justice work. At the other extreme is churches who get involved in partisan politics, believing it is justice work.

Some evangelicals actually believe that the Republican party is the party of Christ. Anyone who is not an evangelical can see through that. They are remaking Christ in the image of their political party. To paraphrase Jim Wallis, Jesus is not a Republican or a Democrat.

The dictionary defines Christian as one who follows Christ or practices the religion of Christ. That is an anachronistic definition for Christians in the first two centuries after Christ. They did not believe that they were practicing a new religion. They still thought of themselves as people of Israel and that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel.

Christian is a transliteration of the Greek word Χριστιανός. A transliteration is a loan word from another language. Instead of translating Χριστιανός into an English word, we copy the Greek word letter for letter into English. The Greek word Χριστιανός has two parts: Χριστός, which means someone who is anointed or smeared with oil, and ιαν, which means belonging to the party of. Herodians are those who belong to the party of Herod. The authors of *After Jesus Before Christianity* translate the word Χριστιανός as belonging to the party of the Anointed.

Christian was a derogatory term. It was coined by Romans to refer to followers of Christ. Romans saw it as a pathetic, weak party that was led by a criminal who had

been crucified. The early followers of Christ did not see themselves as belonging to a party. They were disciples of Christ.

Second Move: Ignoring God's Teaching on Justice

Isaiah is another eighth-century prophet; he is active about 40 years after Amos and a few years after Hosea. Unlike Amos and Hosea, he prophesies to the Southern Kingdom instead of to the Northern Kingdom.

This story is similar to the text from Hosea last week. God is disappointed with the people of Judah. I have reared children and they have rebelled against me. Both Hosea and Isaiah show God as judge whose judgment is tempered by mercy.

God brings a petition against the people of Judah. They have violated the covenant. He asks the heavens and the earth to bear witness to the trial.

The people of Judah have turned their backs on the Holy One of Israel. That is one of Isaiah's favorite expressions for God. It may have originated in Jerusalem and the Temple.

The people have already been punished. The people have entered into an alliance with Egypt to protect themselves from the Assyrian Empire. Isaiah believes that the people should rely on God instead of foreign alliances to protect them. People will adopt the beliefs and practices of empire instead of following the teachings of God.

Assyria conquered Israel, the Northern Kingdom, in 722 BCE. Assyria laid waste to Judah when it conquered Israel; cities were burned down. Judah survived but it is covered from head to foot with bruises and welts. A remnant has survived. Only Zion remains. Zion is an ancient name for Jerusalem.

God showed mercy by not allowing Zion to fall. Otherwise all of Judah would have been destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah are not examples of sexual immorality. That did not come until centuries later when Greece conquered Judah. Sodom and Gomorrah are symbols of violence to strangers—instead of welcoming the strangers, as Abraham did, they brutalized the strangers.

God addresses the king and the people of Judah. He calls them chieftains of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah. The tone shifts from indictment to teaching. Isaiah asks them to give ear to God's Torah, which is the Hebrew word for instruction.

Trample my courts no more. The courts were thought of as a place where God's justice was done. They were supposed to be a place where the rights of the vulnerable were defended and protected.

God takes no delight in their sacrifices. Sacrifices were thought of as sharing a meal with God. I cannot endure your new moons and Sabbaths. These are the religious festivals of the people. Their praise is offensive to God. God will not even listen to their prayers. Their hands are stained with the blood of the most vulnerable people in society.

God commands the people to wash themselves clean and turn away from evil. Devote yourself to justice. Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan. Defend the cause of the widow. The people are charged with protecting them instead of ignoring them.

Isaiah is not delivering an oracle of judgment. The judgment has already happened. He is urging the people to repent.

This distinguishes Isaiah from Amos, which is one oracle of judgment after another. Isaiah is more moderate than the other prophets. Isaiah still holds forth the promise of salvation. The word of God is not always the same in all times and all places.

Third Move: Working with Politicians to Seek Justice

Isaiah is telling us that the core of God's teaching is about justice. You cannot praise the teacher if you do not follow her teaching.

Political parties are more about power than justice or the good of the community. That is an abomination in the eyes of Isaiah. God is the source of true power. The kings of Israel were anointed by God; they were blessed with power and were expected to follow God's teaching. We cannot say that political parties today are anointed by God. All political parties are not created equal, and some are more concerned with the common good than others. On the whole, political parties tend to seize power first and look to preserve their own power before carrying out justice.

I know we have many Democrats here who might object to that. Just this week the Democratic National Committee helped defeat one of the ten Republicans who voted to impeach Trump. They contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to support a MAGA candidate in the Republican primary because they thought he would be easier to defeat in the general election.

As followers of Christ, we can work with politicians and political parties to carry out justice. There is good and bad in both parties. I agree with my own party about 50% of the time, and the other party about 10% of the time.

Catholics as a political force are conservative in this state, but we can work with them on some issues, like immigration and the death penalty.

The current framework of Oklahoma's death penalty statutes was enacted by a Democratic governor and a Democratic legislature. Governor David Boren called a special session in 1976 for the purpose of enacting death penalty statutes that adopted the new framework approved by the US Supreme Court. The vote was 45-1 in the Oklahoma Senate and 93-5 in the Oklahoma House. That was when Oklahoma adopted lethal injection as the preferred mode of execution. We were the first state in the country to adopt lethal injection. It was hailed as a breakthrough in the humane execution of death-row inmates.

God calls us to work for systemic justice, and that is really hard to do. We can work to uphold the rights of the widows and orphans in our society. Mary is committed to the cause of immigrants and I try to comfort and defend death-row prisoners.

We must leave the results to God. Our power comes through witness. Through our ministry we bear witness to what we believe is God's vision of justice. We can hope that inspires other people to see the humanity in immigrants and death-row prisoners.

Conclusion

It is emotionally exhausting work. We gather each Sunday for worship to praise God for giving us a vision of justice and for sustaining us in doing justice work. We praise God for transforming us. We hope that is the kind of worship that is pleasing to God.

We could do more; we are flawed people. We hope that God looks at us as a loving parent looks at children who are trying to comply with the values that the parent has instilled in them. God gives us what we need to prepare the way of the Lord.

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