

“Our soul waits for the Lord;
let your steadfast love be upon us.” AMEN!

We find ourselves, again in the Gospel of Luke,
with words and commands from Jesus
that have us struggling to keep up with him.

We struggle because we like to separate
talk about money and possessions from talk
about faith and trust.

Like the separation between church and state,
we want a separation between faith and money.

We want the two to be different, but
Jesus stretches us to see how the two are
very much entwined.

In fact, all of our texts today explore
the nature of faith in conjunction with
the nature of ethics and what we do with
our money and possessions matters.

In a very real sense our bodies tell us
to put faith in money and possessions while
our spirit (internal self) longs for
a faithful connection with God, right?

We might not be here, or at home,
listening to this sermon,

if we didn't long for a connection
with the Creator;
a purpose for life;
a lesson to learn.

But, it's not only about us, right?

Time and time again Jesus stretches us
with challenges that fly in the face of
the you or the me (the ego)

and draws us to the we and thee. (Pause)

As we begin in Isaiah, indeed at
the beginning of the prophet's book
we are invited by the prophet to ponder
the relationship between worship and ethics.

The action of what we are doing right now,
on a Sunday morning, and with what is going on
in here (point to the heart).

We are Isaiah's audience, but that's
because of the work of the Spirit.

Isaiah's original audience was
to the people of Judah, specifically
the people in Jerusalem.

We know this because of the rulers names that
are listed at the beginning, read so well by Ceilia. :-)

As Isaiah's audience is narrowed down
we find the word of God coming to a people
who have just suffered a great devastation.

You see, Sennacherib, the ruler of the Assyrians,
invaded Judah and laid waste to 46 cities there
and captured Hezekiah up
"like a bird in a cage," in Jerusalem.

Those words come from an outside source
called the Stele of Sennacherib and our
Isaiah text confirms the report.

"Your country lies desolate, your cities
are burned with fire,
in your very presence aliens devour you land;

it is desolate,
as overthrown by foreigners.

And daughter Zion (Jerusalem) is left
like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in
a cucumber field, like a besieged city."
(Isaiah 1:7-8)

So, now the audience of Isaiah is even
further narrowed for us and we see this text
was addressed to the city of Jerusalem.

A city that was barely left standing

following Sennacherib's invasion, and
even more specifically to the leaders there.

The issue was that the action of worship continued
but something vital was missing.

The spared temple was a house of
sacrifice and prayer but it had separated itself
from the suffering people all around it.

What was missing was worship with integrity.

Actions of prayer, song, and word from God
must include reflections/actions of
genuineness and integrity.

One cannot come to worship and
find connection to God, purpose for life
and forgiveness if we neglect the hurting
and the vulnerable around us.

We are not to read this and conclude that God
rejects the entire worship system,
because the key to our understanding is
in the words from Isaiah:

“I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity”
and “your hands are full of blood.”

So it is not worship that God rejects, but worship
that is carried out while participants behave

immorally or display grossly unfair behaviors.

In other words, worship with regard to ethics.

“Acts of worship, even if performed correctly and abundantly, cannot compensate for the mistreatment of people, especially of the weak and oppressed.” (Jennifer Vija Pietz)

What kinds of unethical behavior were the leaders in Jerusalem guilty of?

Were their hands bloody from the blood of sacrificed animals?

Or were their hands full of blood because they had mistreated people?

These were the prophet’s powerful words of the “both/and.”

God has had enough of the burnt offerings and then in verse 17 we find the command to practice justice.

And this is the real point of the prophet’s message.

“The leaders have been mistreating people.

They have not been practicing sound ethics in their dealings with the oppressed and the vulnerable.” (Pause)

Beloved, the Word of God speaks the same message
for our own ears.

“Learn to do good,
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed.” (Is. 1:17)

This aspect of “learning” to do good
reminds us of our continuing need to be transformed
over a period of time.

It’s not a “one and done,” right?

We are never really complete because
we live in this tension of
constant transformation.

The tension is palpable in the gospel.

Being watchful and waiting for
the Son of Humanity to come can
bring on a feeling of hope and fear.

Emotions of excitement and worry... both/and...
The power of the both/and. (Pause)

You see, we have such difficulties in
following the words of Jesus and obeying
His teachings because we are comfortable
in our dualism.

Meaning we like to judge who is right
and who is wrong; what is right and
what is wrong and we so often decide
too quickly and walk around
with anger inside of us ready to
unleash our absolute answers

instead of taking the time needed
for humility and understanding. (Pause)

If you bristle at Jesus' command to sell
possessions and give alms to the poor
ask yourself why?

If you struggle with Jesus' illustration that
the Son of Humanity will come like a thief
perhaps we need to look to whom
does our world belong?

The Spirit of God does not provide an escape
for us from this life, but she does lead us
to hold on loosely to the things we have
and to the money we acquire
for they ultimately do belong to God.

(Pause)

Finally, don't forget the first line of our reading...
it's the good news! :-)

“Don't be afraid, little flock, for it is

your Father's good pleasure to give you
the kingdom."

God's "good pleasure" or God's "enjoyment" to give.

It's what Jesus said and what Jesus did...

What, then, do we say? What, then, will we do?

AMEN!