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Pentecost XIV & Proper 16
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Text: Isaiah 29:11 – 19
Title:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Have you ever tried to persuade someone to change their view on an important issue? We see it every time there's an election in our country with people constantly trying to talk others into voting for their preferred candidate. To be sure, it's difficult to change someone's mind when it comes to politics, but have you ever tried to persuade someone to change when it comes to their faith? It can seem like a waste of breath, and for that reason, most of us don't even try to do it. It seems like a pointless waste of time.

I think that's probably the way that many of the prophets had to feel at certain times of their ministry among God's people. Jeremiah was told to warn the people that they were about to be exiled, but they didn't pay any attention to him. God told the prophet Hosea that he had to marry a prostitute and have children with her. His wife's unfaithfulness would be a reflection of Israel's unfaithfulness to God, and he would eventually have to purchase her back just as God would buy back the soul of His chosen people. Just a couple of weeks ago we saw that Elijah was marked for execution after he defeated the prophets of Baal and had them killed, and while he was hiding he asked God to take his life because he believed that he was the last faithful man in the land. And of course there's today's prophet, Isaiah.

I'm sure that he had to know the idea of futility in his ministry. Look at what happened when he was called by God back in the sixth chapter of his book. Isaiah is given a look into the actual throne room of heaven, and he sees the Lord Himself sitting there. The prophet fears for his life because he knows that he is a "man of unclean lips" and he "dwells in the midst of a

people of unclean lips.” He knows that a sinful man such as himself deserves death in the presence of such perfect Holiness.

But instead of suffering death, the Lord acted to save Isaiah, and his lips were purified and his sins atoned for when a burning coal touched his lips from the throne room’s altar. Once He had been made clean, Isaiah heard the Lord’s voice asking who He should send to the people, and Isaiah immediately replied, “Here am I! Send me.” That’s when Isaiah heard the Lord tell him for the first time that his mission and work would be pointless. “Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed.’”

In other words, the Lord is sending Isaiah to His chosen people, but He knows that they will ignore what is said. They will hear, but they will refuse to understand. His Word will keep them that way so that He may discipline them for their sins. The Lord is so disgusted with the nation of Israel that He doesn’t even refer to them as His people like in other parts of the Old Testament. Instead, He refers to them as “this people,” and He doesn’t even acknowledge that they are His chosen nation. The Lord is sending Isaiah to these same people on a mission that the Lord Himself has already declared to be futile. But that doesn’t stop the Lord from sending the prophet anyway so that they might have yet another chance to hear and repent.

Today’s reading from Isaiah 29 is one more effort on the Lord’s behalf to reach His people through the words of His prophet even while He has Isaiah restate the futility of the attempt. “And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, ‘Read this,’ he says, ‘I cannot, for it is sealed.’ And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, ‘Read this,’ he says, ‘I cannot

read.” The vision that is being talked about here deals with the future siege of Jerusalem that will be held by the Assyrians. Israel is being warned, but they’re not listening to the Lord.

That’s nothing different in the Biblical history of humanity. Adam and Eve were warned not to eat the fruit in the Garden of Eden, and they didn’t listen to the warning. Lot’s wife didn’t listen to the warning that she was given not to look back at Sodom and Gomorrah as the Lord was destroying them, and she was turned into a pillar of salt when she did. King Saul didn’t listen to the warnings that he heard from the Prophet and Judge, Samuel, and because of his faithlessness his royal line was cut off from the throne of Israel and it was given to David.

People have been ignoring the warnings of God ever since the beginning and that trend still continues today. There are church bodies out there today that blatantly ignore the Word of God as being irrelevant and outdated, and they end up making decisions such as declaring homosexuality to be “normal and acceptable to a Christian life.” In other words, they make the decision on their own that something that is expressly called a sin by God is no longer a sin. After Paul listed homosexuality among numerous sins that man falls prey too, he then described these kinds of churches in Romans 1:32 when he said, “Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” They ignore the blatant warnings of God’s Word, and they even actively work against it because they have decided that their will is more important than God’s.

That’s also what you and I are doing whenever we sin. We are trying to force God to be subject to our will instead of us submitting to His. Submission doesn’t come easy to any of us which is why today’s Epistle reading from Ephesians offends so many people, especially women in our society, even though it’s also telling men to love their wives in the same way as Christ loved His Church. Like rebellious children, when you and I sin we are telling God that we know better than He does and that we don’t need His Laws. We say that His commandments don’t

matter because we are in control of our own life. Isaiah describes our sinful condition perfectly in verse 16 when he says in his poetic way, “You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, ‘He did not make me’; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, ‘He has no understanding’?”

But Isaiah is identifying more sins of “this people” than just a refusal to listen to the Lord’s warning. “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men...” The people are guilty of worshipping in an empty way. They see their worship as a way for them to manipulate God into doing something that they want, and their fear of the Lord comes from a man-made teaching instead of the fear and awe that God encourages from His people. They actually believe that God is supposed to do what they need Him to do as long as they do the right sacrifices in the right way. But all that they’re doing is paying lip-service to God. They have no real faith.

This is exactly what Jesus is talking about in this morning’s reading from Mark 7. The Pharisees and the scribes have come to see Jesus, and they are offended that His disciples dare to eat without observing the required ritual washing. In their zeal to keep the Jews on the proper path before God, the Pharisees, the scribes, and the chief priests had established a supplemental set of laws. For example, they regulated how far a person could walk on the Sabbath, and how much people were permitted to do before the task would be considered “work.” It’s one of these regulations that the disciples are violating, and as the self-appointed keepers of the law, they are taking offense at their indifference.

But Jesus identifies their hypocrisy as fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy. He quotes the prophet directly, and accuses them of placing their own traditions above God’s commandments. They are taking pride in their own piety, and relying on their own ability to keep the Law of God.

Fortunately, God has more than words of condemnation and warning for His people. In verse 14 of this reading from Isaiah – whose book is often referred to as the fifth Gospel or the Gospel Book of the Old Testament – the Lord follows up His indictment of their empty worship by saying, “...therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.” There is hope in these words of promise. In spite of the idolatry and sin of this people, the Lord still has plans to do wonderful things among them, and to keep doing more and more wonders until His plans are completed.

What will these wonders consist of? Isaiah expands on them in verses 18 – 19, “In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of the gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.” 700 years before the birth of Jesus, this prophet told of the miracles that the Messiah would do. Jesus healed the deaf and gave sight to the blind in both a physical and spiritual way. In Jesus, there is no difference between the poor and the rich, the meek and the proud. All who have faith in Him are blessed through Him.

In Jesus life, death and resurrection, this prophecy was first fulfilled, and our guilt from the Lord’s condemnation was removed just like Isaiah’s was removed in the heavenly throne room. And on the Last Day when Christ returns, this prophecy will be fulfilled even more. No one will be deaf or blind, and His wonders will be beyond anything that we can even begin to imagine. The faithful will be given eternal life with Him, while those who ignore His warnings will face eternal damnation. In those days, as Isaiah says at the close of His book, “I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.” For this we pray that the Lord Jesus comes soon. Amen. In the name of the Father...Amen.