**August 11, 2019**

**Isaiah 1:1-20**

The Israelites have a problem. We have a problem. God called people to be chosen as God’s children, but they – we – rebelled. “The ox knows its owner, the donkey knows its stable; but God’s people do not know [where they belong]. God’s people do not understand…” People act as though nothing is wrong. We continue to claim God. We continue to worship God. We continue to bring offerings and pray and gather in solemn assemblies, but God can “no longer endure” our worship. God cannot stomach our offerings, hear our prayers, or watch our displays of piety. God is fed up with who we proclaim ourselves to be – who we *think* we are, and who we wish we were.

This chapter is about the ways that we worship. AND it is about the hypocrisy and empty piety we have when we leave worship. Our worship services are structured with a particular movement each week. Just like the plot structure of a traditional novel, we have a rise and fall of action each week:

(1) We begin worship praising God. We sing, “Alleluia!” and “Praise!” and “Glory!” The accusation God made here in Isaiah is that we are not singing God’s praises on Sunday evening and Tuesday morning and Friday afternoon. God is angry that our praise is confined to this one particular day and hour and place.

(2) After praising God and admitting God’s power and strength and glory each week, we move to admitting who we really are. We confess that we are *not* God, and we confess our sin and brokenness each week. The charge God levelled in Isaiah is that we are not living that truth every day. We do not admit our humble position on Monday morning and Wednesday night; instead, God argued that we live (and expect others to live) as though *we* are God – almighty, omnipotent, sinless and perfect. And even worse, we do not embody God’s true nature of loving and compassionate and looking out for the young and the weak and the needy. We have actually done evil *against* God and our neighbors. We have lived in corruption, seeking what pleases ourselves, not what is pleasing for God or merciful for creation.

(3) In worship, we move from Confession to the reading and proclamation of God’s Word. This is when we are reminded of God’s call to us – who God is, and who we are called to be. God’s Word is at the center of our worship; it is the hubcap from which all worship stems. It is the heartbeat of our worship and identity as God’s children. The accusation God made in Isaiah is that God’s Word is not the center of our daily life and being. God charged that scripture is not the hubcap from which our whole life stems. God’s Word is not the heartbeat of our identity.

(4) In worship, after the reading and proclamation of God’s Word, we move to our response. We stand up and state what we believe. We bring our offerings forward. We sing and pray and reflect on what we heard in scripture. The question God asked in Isaiah is why we do this in worship, but not in our daily living? Why do we hear God’s Word, but then respond with empty piety or rebellion? Why do we hear God’s Word in worship, but then go out into the world to do evil, pursuing in-justice, abandoning the oppressed, attacking the orphan, and ignoring the widow?

For living in such an offensive way, God declared that our hands are full of blood. Our hands, which could be serving and loving, have not done as God intended. Compared with Daniel (whose handiwork formed the basis of last week’s story: Following [God] Always Intentionally, with Truth & Humility), the prayer-work of our hands has not been faithful, humble, truthful, or intentional. Before going any further, then, everyone is asked to take the red hand you were given earlier (a bloody hand) and write a way that you see hypocrisy or disconnections between our regular worship and our daily living. Think specifically about your own life (not about others), though you may think about our shared life as a congregation or country… PAUSE…

The news from Mississippi this week told of a battalion of ICE agents (600 agents!) who surrounded food processing plants and took 680 people into custody. Yet the ramifications of taking *that many* people into custody seemed to have gone undone – providing safe and sanitary holding, providing food and medical care, and planning for the people and things unexpectedly left behind (pets hungry at home, children arriving home to locked doors, infants and toddlers left in daycare, cars abandoned in lots and such). The expected number of prisoners was bound to affect (even decimate) that rural community. What thought was taken for those innocent victims? What thought was taken for the largely white-owned companies guilty of hiring whatever workers were cheapest and dependent on the crumbs *under the table*? For those agents who participated in the planning and enactment of the raid, for those who read this story in the news afterwards and thought it was a good idea, how can we reconcile these actions with scripture’s consistent call to rescue the oppressed? How could we read Isaiah’s scripture and say that this raid *defended* the orphan and pled for the plight of the widow?

Whether we participated in the raid, or championed the raid, or sat idly (or quietly) on the sidelines hoping it wasn’t true, we have blood on our hands. God is angry. God cannot stand anymore of our worship if we are not then going to live it out in the world. God demands that we hold ourselves accountable and take action.

“Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean.” This is not a picture of the all-patient God who cleans up all our messes. This is God at the wits-end, telling us, God’s misbehaving children, to clean up our own mess. Purify ourselves.

Friends, we cannot let this and other evil handiwork pass us by. We must do more than share “our thoughts and prayers.” We must do more than sit and pray in the comfort of worship or our daily prayers. We must abandon any empty piety or hypocrisy that lies between our worship and our living. We must put our faith to action. We must use our hands to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

A few minutes ago we each wrote a disconnection between worship and daily living on these bloody hands. On the other side, you are now invited to write down an action that you can do related to that particular behavior or issue. Maybe you could contact an elected official, sharing both the problem and these verses in Isaiah? Maybe you could take the initiative to help someone this week? Maybe you could change the way that you are praying in worship, seeking more authentic expressions of who you are and who God calls you to be? Whatever it is, know that neither I nor anyone in this church or in this world stands in judgment over you or your actions. God alone knows who you are and what you’ve done (or not done). Ask God then to lead you to faithful living, using your hands to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.