

WORSHIP THAT MATTERS

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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” These, of course, are the opening words to that great novel by Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. The two cities are London and Paris in the year 1775, in the leadup to the French Revolution. But these words could also be used to begin the Old Testament book of Isaiah describing not two cities but two states of living with God. For Isaiah, the best of times were the people’s belief that they were worshiping God. The worst of times were the peoples’ failure to demonstrate compassion to the needy.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...”

Our reading from the first chapter of Isaiah does indeed mention two cities, just not London and Paris. Instead, it tells of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah are two locations that we read about early in the book of Genesis that famously were wiped from the face of the earth by God’s wrath. As Christians, we normally attribute the destruction of these places to God’s judgement on the sexual sins of the inhabitants. But that is not necessarily the situation.

The prophet Ezekiel has a different explanation. Ezekiel describes the sin of Sodom as being pride and prosperity all as they refused to *aid the poor and needy*. According to Ezekiel, God explains, *[The people of Sodom] were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it* (Ezekiel 16:48-50). The sin of Sodom was a failure to demonstrate care to the destitute.

In our reading for today, the prophet Isaiah warns the nation of Judah that it will suffer the same fate as Sodom and Gomorrah if the people do not change their sinful ways.

Isaiah was a prophet who ministered to the Judeans in the 8th century BC. His tenure lasted between forty and sixty years. As a prophet, it was not his job to foretell the future, but rather to interpret God’s word to the people. It was the role of the prophet to speak the hard words that people didn’t want to hear. And that could not be more true than in the first chapter of the book that bears his name. This chapter sets the stage for all that will follow. Here, Isaiah calls the people to change, to repent, to turn back to God or else all will be lost. Isaiah’s very name is a

mashup of the Hebrew words for God and salvation. It means, “God will save.” From the start, we get the feeling that we are witnessing God’s saving acts across history.

In this reading, Isaiah is considering the big picture. He is not focused on an individual, or even a town. He is prophesying to the entire nation and condemning them for generations of sins. He does this from his vantage point of decades of ministering to the people. He is warning them that unless Judah changes its ways, it will end up like the infamous Sodom and Gomorrah. The continuing message through this book is the people must repent, they must change, they must redirect their lives toward God, or calamity will consume them all.

The criticism that Isaiah lays on Judah is that in their prosperity they have lost sight of God. They go through the motions of extravagant worship of God, but their worship is hollow, it is meaningless because the people fail to embrace God in their hearts.

But if they are worshiping God, then why does God complain? Aren’t the people doing everything that they have been instructed to do. They make sacrifices and burnt offerings. They bring forth the fat of well-fed animals. They burn incense. They observe all the feasts and festivals. They pray. And yet God is not pleased. The nation, God says, is lost.

What makes this reading so unique is that it is not simply a rant by the Almighty, but rather it is set in the context of a trial. It is a courtroom scene and this is God’s indictment against Judah’s’ covenantal crimes. We see this when God says, *Come now, let us argue it out.* God sets out a challenge by saying, “Convince me, make your case.”

God’s argument is that although the people make the appearance of worshiping the Lord in the temple, they fail to worship God in their lives. They pray and make sacrifices in the temple, but beyond the temple walls they neglect to do good works toward their neighbors. They don’t fight for justice; they don’t shield the oppressed; they don’t come to the aid of the orphaned and widowed.

For their failure to assist those at the margins, God denounces their worship. He is tired of all their sacrifices. He’s had enough of their burnt offerings. He takes no delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats that are slain on the altar in his name. Their offerings are futile. The smell of their incense burns God’s eyes. All their festivals have become little more than a burden to the Lord. As God says, *I cannot endure [your] solemn assemblies with iniquity.*

Worship is not just what we do here in this room, worship is also what we do out there in the world. There’s the old saying that you can tell a lot about a person about how they treat the waiter. A perfect gentleman is not perfect if he is dismissive to the wait staff or the uber driver or the flight attendant. A person

cannot praise God's name in the temple and then go out and act like God does not exist. We worship God with our actions.

As we read in scripture, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength* (Deut 6:5). Our strength is our actions. How we love God is shown in how we treat the homeless sleeping on our steps. It is how we care for the elderly who have no family. It is our concern toward the immigrant and refugee. It is our decision to protect our children from violence. We can shout Praise the Lord until our voices collapse but it is nothing more than an annoying echo unless it is accompanied by acts of love.

As I said, this passage presents to us a courtroom trial. In it, the people are indicted for failing to follow God's word. They are guilty. But the thing is, they will always be guilty, they will always sin, we always sin. We can be made clean but only through God's mercy. It is God who takes our scarlet sins and makes them clean like snow. That is the promise of salvation—to be made new through God's power.

But as I said, this is not something we can do ourselves; we can't make ourselves sinless; the jury will never find us not guilty. We will be sentenced.

And God knows this and so God came to earth to take our place in the courtroom and accept our punishment as his own. Through Jesus, God died for our sins

In a moment we will gather at the table to celebrate the holy sacrament of communion. In this sacrament we will eat the bread and drink the cup. Communion is a reminder of Christ's great sacrifice. As we eat the bread and drink from the cup let us give thanks for God's mercy and let us dedicate our lives to serving those at the margins. Let us make it the best of times.