

We're in the 3rd year of a 3-year cycle of readings. And during the summer and fall of this 3rd year, our Old Testament lessons are all from the prophets. And today and next week, we have readings from perhaps the most important and beloved prophet, Isaiah.

Now you may be thinking, "Wait a minute... If Isaiah is so important, why are we only hearing from him this week and next week?" That's a good question. Here's a good answer.

Isaiah is so important that he dominates our 3-year cycle of Old Testament readings. More than 1 out of every 4 Old Testament readings in our cycle is from Isaiah. We hear him in Advent. We hear him at Christmas. We hear him in Epiphany, in Lent and Holy Week. In addition to the readings this week and next week we hear Isaiah 42 other times. He is the big gorilla amongst the list of Old Testament books in our cycle of readings.

So, we don't need to hear a lot of Isaiah during our summer and fall trek through the prophets. But we do have two important readings this week and next week that don't come up on other Sundays.

Today, our reading comes from the very beginning of Isaiah, the first chapter.

And in the chapter, Isaiah introduces a revolutionary idea. It's an idea that will have some influence on early Judaism. But it will also have a huge influence on early Christianity. Christians more than any other group in the ancient world will take this idea and run with it. It will become central to the Christian faith.

And it's an idea that's so ingrained that we take it for granted. It doesn't even hit our radar screens that things could have been any other way.

And yet, for most of human history, things were exactly the opposite. And in the culture in which early Christianity grew up, things were exactly the opposite.

And the first one to suggest something different was a prophet who lived 700 years before Jesus, the Prophet Isaiah.

So what was this change that Isaiah promotes? What is this radically new idea that is present in Isaiah's prophecies that would have such an influence on Christianity?

It is this.

For most of human history, religion had very little to do, or even nothing to do with what you believed. Religion was not mainly about what was in your heart or your soul. Ancient religion was not really about your internal disposition or your thoughts or your beliefs.

I know. That's so ingrained, we can't imagine anything different. But if your religion was not about what was inside you, then what was it about?

In the ancient world, and still amongst some people today, religion was not about what you believed, but rather about what you did. Religion and worship were all about engaging

in various ceremonies. To them it didn't really matter much what you believed on the inside. It's whether you engaged in the ceremonies on the outside.

As long as you showed up at the right temple at the right times and did the correct ceremonies, then you fulfilled the duties of your religion. It didn't matter so much what you believed. And it didn't matter so much what you did at other times. It was more about going through the correct motions than anything else.

There are lots of possible corollaries and meanings and consequences and pitfalls of such a mindset about religion being an external observance. I want to quickly mention 3 of them.

First pitfall: If religion is about just participating in a ceremony, this leads many people to think in magical terms. Magical thinking puts the worshipper in control. If I do the ceremony right, I'll have a guaranteed outcome. I'll be doing this ceremony not to worship a god or pay honor to a god. I'll do the ceremony in order to get what I want from the god. If I do the ceremony right, I'll get my desired outcome. This turns religious ceremonies into a vending machine. I insert worship. I get back what I want. In extreme versions, I'll be controlling the gods by doing the proper ceremony in just the right way.

Second pitfall: I may be going through the motions religiously. But I don't really have to believe anything. This was very common in the ancient world, especially in Greece and Rome. Many people worshipped because it was a cultural expectation. But they didn't necessarily believe in the gods. Some did. Some didn't. Participating in worship for many just became a civic duty.

Third pitfall: If I do what's expected of me as far as external religious observances, then I can do whatever I want the rest of the time and I'll still be good with God or with the gods. I can lie, cheat, steal and even murder the rest of the time, as long as I go to the temple on official religious days and do the proper ceremony to honor the gods. To put it in our cultural terms, as long as I go to church on Sunday, I can behave any way I want to and do whatever I want to Monday through Saturday, and I'll be just fine as far as God is concerned.

And this is the mindset that Isaiah is pushing back against, hard, in our Old Testament lesson today.

God is addressing the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding nation of Judah. And God is not happy with them.

In Isaiah, God blasts the people about the sacrifices they're bringing to the Temple. God says, "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams... I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats."¹

In other words, God is not happy with the offerings, the sacrificial animals the people are bringing to the temple.

¹ Is 1:11

And then God says, "When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?"²

Well, strictly speaking, the answer is, 'God, you asked this. 500 years earlier in the time of the Exodus from Egypt, God—you set up the rules for the sacrificial system—what kinds of sacrifices to make, when, and for what purposes.'

Yet now, God says, "Bringing offerings is futile."³

And then God goes on and talks about the religious festivals the people are observing. Weekly sabbaths, monthly new moon festivals, and other annual celebrations. God says of these:

"My soul hates (them); they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them."⁴

So has God changed his mind between 1,200 BC and 700 BC? Does God no longer want the people to worship in the Temple according to the rules he laid down in Exodus and Leviticus?

The short answer is "no." God is not changing the rules here. But instead, he's worried about why the people are offering sacrifices and observing religious festivals. It's back to that 3rd pitfall. The people seem to be going through the motions in the Temple, doing what they're supposed to do there. But their faith, their religion, their following of the God of Israel is not carrying over into the rest of their daily lives.

And here's where God really blasts them.

Earlier God asked, "When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?" As I said, the surface answer is, 'God, you did.'

But then God comes back to the image of hands: "When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood."⁵

Aha.

God doesn't want sacrifices brought by their hands. God will ignore the prayers they offer when they lift up their hands. Why? Because their hands are full of blood.

Literal blood? Metaphorical blood? Probably some instances of each, depending on the person.

² Is 1:12

³ Is 1:12

⁴ Is 1:14

⁵ Is 1:15

But the bottom line is, people are not behaving ethically and lovingly towards others. They go to the Temple and do their worship thing and check off that box. But then they live vicious lives treating others badly the rest of the time. That's what God is pushing back so strongly against.

And God lays it out explicitly. Change. In our terms, make your Monday through Saturday life match your Sunday morning life.

God commands,
"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."⁶

What God is saying is basically that he wants the whole package. He wants what we say we believe in church to be lived out in the rest of our daily lives.

God is not asking for selective obedience: I'll come worship God on Sundays and then do whatever I want the rest of the week. No. God is asking for all of us, not just some small compartmentalized part of us.

When Jesus sums up the essence of God's commands, he says,
"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... (AND) You shall love your neighbor as yourself."⁷

Love God totally, Jesus is saying. Not just partially or one day a week but 24/7. AND loving God also means loving your neighbor as yourself, and seeking to do that 24/7.

In Isaiah, God warns us, that if we approach God in worship and in prayer, and yet our hands are either metaphorically or literally covered in blood, our prayers and your worship are going to be empty, and they're not going to do us any good. This is a VERY important warning to us.

But at the end of our lesson, we also hear a wonderful expression of good news. When we fall short, God offers us forgiveness and cleansing. God says in Isaiah,
"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."⁸

And for Christians that source of cleansing is clear. It is Jesus. As the New Testament says in a similar image, "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."⁹

⁶ Is 1:16-17

⁷ Mt 22:37, 39

⁸ Is 1:18

⁹ Rev 7:14

Yes, God confronts us in Isaiah. God wants all of us, not just a part of us. God asks us to love him and love others.

And God asks us to love in response to his love for us. After all, God loves us long before we can make any attempt to love him.

And God also offers to change us. What is blood-red can become snow-white.

God is worthy of our love, worthy of our worship.

God, cleanse our hearts, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord.