

## Bath Time: Make Yourselves Clean

### Isaiah 1:1, 1:10-20

Dr. Douglas Learned

Sunday, August 12, 2007

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Isaiah, like the other prophets in Scripture, takes us back to the basics in our relationship with God and with one another.

In popular culture prophets are often portrayed as tellers of the future, almost magical in their insights. But Biblical prophets were not so much magical as they were truthful about the consequences of God's people ignoring his will and purpose for their lives.

A prophet's specialty is the truth. And Isaiah was one of those truth tellers, centuries before the birth of Jesus.

In Isaiah's time, the Holy Land was divided into different political regions. Israel was to the north, and Judah to the south, with Jerusalem as Judah's capital. And Judah had a series of kings, some ruled well and some did not, who lived under the threat of the Assyrian Empire.

During that time Isaiah called the people back to the Lord's ways in worship, so they might experience the blessings of his covenant with them. "The vision of Isaiah, son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." (Isaiah 1:1)

Let us pray:

*Eternal God, you have been speaking your truth through prophets, priests, and kings since you first made covenant with your people. Attune our hearts and minds to your truth in this time. Help us apply what we read and hear from these ancient holy texts to our lives today, so that what we offer you in worship is pleasing to you, and a blessing to the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

A pastor was in conversation with a little girl. And in that conversation the pastor spoke to the girl about Jesus' love for children. "Jesus really loves children, you know?"

"Yes, I know," said the girl.

And so the pastor continued by telling her of the time when Jesus' disciples got into competition with one another, each insisting he was the greatest, the most important. And how Jesus, seeing such bad behavior, lifted a child up into his lap, and said, "Whoever thinks he is really great should pay more attention to children. Whoever lives by their example is close to God's heart."

And so the pastor continued in that vein, asking the little girl, "Isn't that wonderful that Jesus taught his disciples that way?"

To which the girl replied, "Yeah. When Jesus said that to the adults he meant, 'More wild; less talk!'"

History repeats itself.

Do you remember as a child, wondering why adults liked to talk so much?

We have our rituals, our routines, and our talk. And so many of those rituals, routines, and talk give deep and sustaining meaning to our lives and should never change.

But Isaiah's focus in our passage for this morning concerns rituals, routines, and talk in worship in the

Temple in Jerusalem that had lost their meaning and were no longer pleasing to God.

In verse 2, the prophet exclaims, "Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken; I reared up children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me."

What God is getting at through the prophet is that his people had begun to major in the minors when it comes to worship. They had become preoccupied with the rituals of the Temple, making sure all their sacrifices and burnt offerings were in order. They were singing all the right songs and saying all the prescribed prayers, but in the meantime letting widows and orphans starve.

God's people were coming to church on Sundays, but Sunday was not translating into the rest of their week. He says in verse 11, "I have had enough of your burnt offerings...I do not delight in the blood of bulls," and later in verse 13, "bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me...I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity."

When he speaks of iniquity, he is speaking of the disconnect all those worshipers have between their words in the Temple, and the way they treat each other outside its doors. He wants them to repent of their unrighteousness before they enter worship: "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." (v. 16)

Prophets insist on the truth with God's people, insist that all their talk, and all their appearances in worship, line up with daily life.

I think that is a strain of prophecy Jesus gets to right away in his ministry when he stands on the side of a hill, centuries later, a place of elevation, not unlike a Temple mount (you can read this in chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel), and preaches what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount, and within that, the Beatitudes, "Blessed are those who thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the meek [the humble], for they will inherit the earth."

Who is the greatest in worship? Those who put themselves in service to God's people. It is a word of truth. And it is a revealing word about the meaning of worship which is, at its best, an act of offering our very selves to God.

What God is saying to his people, even in the time of animal sacrifices prescribed in the Levitical codes, is that none of those dead sacrifices amounts to anything if those who make the offerings cannot back them up with the sacrifice of their very lives, given for the sake of those who suffer around them.

Oh, that is so much easier talked about than done! But it is in the doing that we are restored to our covenant with God, not just in the talking. Less talking, more care for God's children! It is what Isaiah taught, and it is what Jesus taught centuries later. It is what we are called to do as Jesus' followers.

Should I stop talking now? I am tempted!

Levitical law in Isaiah's times prescribes that those who would enter the Temple had to bathe, which had the effect of not only cleaning the body, but also made the worshipper ritually clean, acceptable to enter into the Temple for worship.

And what is so amazing about this passage, particularly verses 16-17, is that Isaiah, in line with Jesus' teachings that would come later, takes religious ritual and turns it into a way of life. And that is what Jesus wants of us, to take religious ritual and translate it into daily living, daily action.

So when Isaiah says, "Wash yourselves," he is not only talking about that Saturday night bath in preparation for church, he is also talking about washing ourselves through service to our neighbor. We make ourselves clean before God by getting our hands dirty!

Since I have come to NPC, I have been so impressed by the many missions our church is involved in. In

one of our services in June we prayed for all the groups that were heading out on mission this summer. One of those was our youth mission trip to the Dominican Republic, in which our young people dug holes for the construction of latrines, assisted with a free medical clinic with local doctors, and organized Vacation Bible School programs, among other things. Through all that service our young members served in Christ's name, as missionaries from our church.

I have to tell you, I am really impressed by those stories of digging holes for latrines. I do not know the last time you dug a hole in the hot summer sun, but that is hard work! From all I have heard, I imagine the young people of NPC have dug up half the countryside on that island!

But what impresses me even more are the stories of what happens *around* all that work: the relationships our young people build with the people, both believers and non-believers, and the witness to Jesus they share. I have to believe that all those acts of service-- digging, distribution of medicine, organization of classes for children— speak volumes about God's love for his people.

So our young missionaries were not only *talking* about Jesus, they were *embodying* Jesus' ministry to God's people: a living sacrifice made by our young people, in which those who have little were served in tangible ways by those who had an abundance to give; a sacrifice, no doubt, most pleasing to God.

Am I preaching works righteousness? Am I insisting that none of us is right with God until we have dug a latrine? I suppose I am in a sense.

Not in the sense that our good works earn us a ticket heaven, but in the sense that our good works prepare us for heaven. Shape our character for heaven. Condition our hearts and minds for the kind of heaven Jesus is calling us to: one in which the lowly are lifted up, and the lofty are called to service, and the rough places are made plane. And all are equally blessed because of it.

So I do not know if digging holes is your thing, but I feel confident God has something you can do that will shape your character for Christ, and in the process serve as a blessing to someone else. All of us can serve in some way, and therefore give witness to Christ through both word and act.

Even as I say those words, I think of a woman in one of the churches that I served whose sole ministry was to pray for the members of the church. She was not able to move out of her apartment because of physical limitations. But she saw her praying as her act of service, and she attended to those prayers faithfully. All of us are called to serve in Jesus' name.

And by the way, did you notice there is a blood drive going on this morning out the back entrance of the church? I just thought I would mention that.

And once blessed through our service, we enter into worship understanding that worship is not for us. Worship is for God. And worship that honors God, honors God's people.

Recently I have been re-reading a book by Janna Tull Steed, titled *Duke Ellington: A Spiritual Biography*. As many of you know, Ellington was born and raised in Washington, DC. Ellington did not always live the most churchly of lives, but much of his music and personal insights were shaped by his Christian background in the Baptist and AME churches. Later in his life, his devotion to God became quite intent and shaped the composition of his music and public mission.

As a side note, one of my favorite pictures in Steed's book is of Ellington standing on this very step, at the front of this chancel on an evening in March of 1970, surrounded by NPC singers with hands raised up during a benefit concert to support a scholarship fund for students of the arts with financial needs in DC.

Choir, when is the last time you raised your hands like that?

Those close to Ellington knew that in his personal time for devotion there was an image he liked to keep in sight. It was a depiction of the Cross shaped by the letters of two words: L-O-V-E from top to bottom, and G-O-D from left to right, with the O as the common letter. It was this image he tacked to a wall and

contemplated in the final hours before his death.

Last week we considered the steadfast love of the Lord which endures forever. And when I think about the cross of Jesus, I see the very focus of our worship, centered on the example of sacrifice embodied by God's love for us in the person of Jesus, and in the ministry of Jesus.

Blessed are the humble. Blessed are those who seek righteousness. Blessed are those who are pure in heart.

What counts is looking toward that cross, where God's love is made real. This is the sacrifice that matters to God. And it is the sacrifice that shapes not only our words and worship, but the very way we live.

It is through this sacrifice that we are made right, made clean in God's eyes. Through it we are called to be blessed and called to be a blessing as we worship and serve.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray:

*God of all righteousness, help us to conform our lives to Jesus, so that what we do in worship connects to how we serve our brothers and sisters in this world, so the name of Jesus is lifted up and your good news is known among all the nations. Amen.*