

“Hear the Word”

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Romans 10:12-21;
Luke 4:16-21

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Isaiah. It is the fourth window back that shows a picture of Isaiah. Isaiah is holding a glowing coal because there is a story at the beginning of his experience as a prophet when he has God touch his lips with a glowing coal so that he can speak for God.

The book of Isaiah is a complicated book and if we were to spend a lot of time together we could go through much more than we can do in this short period of time we've got. Isaiah itself as a book is probably more like two books. There's a lot there. The verse on beating swords into plowshares is depicted in the window, for example. We go to Isaiah to hear the foreshadowing of the coming of Christ. What I would like to think about today with Isaiah, however, is the prophetic message that he provides, that he is the poster child for. He's one of the major prophets probably coming out of 8th Century B.C. and speaking to the Israelites about what was to come.

Of course, we sometimes think that prophecy is only about predicting what is to come, but it is really about thinking about what God is saying into the life of the people. It's often saying, “Things might happen this way if you don't change the way you're going.”

So what is Isaiah saying, summed up? In particular ways on through his prophecy, he is calling a people to hear God's voice. These verses today sum it up, and I think it's pretty straightforward. He says “hear” and “listen.” He says it in kind of a rough way, because he says, “Hear, Sodom, and listen Gomorrah.” He's not suggesting they are on track at that moment. If you know anything about Sodom and Gomorrah, the two cities that were so sinful that they were destroyed, it's not a great thing to be told that you are like Sodom and Gomorrah.

But he says, “Hear, listen.” Then he goes on to say, “Here's what it's all about. You do this religious stuff. You go sacrifice your animals, you have these assemblies, you do your worship thing, but how do you live your lives?” God cares more about who we are than what we say to him, especially if what we're saying is, “Here, take this offering, God, so that you will be pleased or appeased.” That's what it feels like sometimes. Just please God with a little bit of worship, appease God with these sacrifices. It seems to be what Isaiah is saying to the Israelites. God's not so excited about that being all they do or about how they live their lives. What does he say? “Cease doing evil. Do good, seek justice, bring release to the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” I'd like to think through that a little bit.

Cease doing evil seems like a pretty broad term. It's interesting to me that the Hebrew behind that is the idea of breaking. So what is it that they are breaking? If evil can be thought of in one way as something that is broken—broken lives, broken relationships—it's brokenness. So he's saying cease causing the brokenness.

Then, he says to do good. Again, one of those pretty general terms: do good. Behind that term "good" is the idea of dealing well with one another. I went through and looked at each of these Hebrew words and it's kind of interesting that backstory, the etymology of those words, because it suggests that it's about doing well with one another. Cease breaking and do well. That makes some sense.

Seek justice. The word for justice tends to mean to work at having right relationships. Make it so those who feel captivated or oppressed are released. Defend the orphan. Who is more defenseless than an orphan? Defend the defenseless. Plead for the widow. The widow would have been one who had no voice unless she had a son or a male relative who could speak for her. Give voice to the voiceless.

It feels rather clear that that's what God would like God's people to be about. What's the problem? There's that famous line that comes right after that. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they would be as white as snow." It's about sin. I suggest that this is a nice roadmap that Isaiah is giving them.

What's sin? The easiest definition of sin, and again, behind the word is this idea of missing the mark, missing the target. So it's a little bit like if I'm supposed to be finding my way to the pulpit, but I'm here in the center of the chancel and it's easy to go down the stairs, so I'll just go down the stairs. I see that this aisle is a nice path. Is it going to get me to the pulpit? I could ask someone which way it is to the pulpit. Oh, I have to turn around and go up the stairs? Thank you. But I think I'll keep going down this path. Which way is it to the pulpit? Back the other way? So I've had two prophets tell me which way to go, but you know, this is a nice path. Will it take me where I need to go? No, I have to turn around. If I listen to these prophets I can at least get close to the right place.

That's a lot like what's going on here. Why don't they listen? Why don't the Israelites listen? Well, they would have to turn around. They would have to quit doing some of the things they're doing. They might have to think about some of the other people that right now they don't have to think about. Right now, these other people don't complicate their lives. They don't interfere. Maybe some of

those people are even making their lives better by being their servants, their slaves. It's a lot easier to keep going down the same path.

Isaiah said all that how many years ago? And what did he say about these people? They ended up being contrary and rebellious. Years later Paul says the same thing. They struggle to try to hear God. It's interesting; in the 8th century B.C. Isaiah was speaking these words. About eight hundred years later, who does Jesus look to? He looks to Isaiah. He says, "Isaiah has this message and it's the same message that God is sending me to bring to you—a message of freeing the oppressed, recovery of sight, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor." A time when we all gather together as God's people.

The message seems rather clear. Why isn't it easy to do? Just think about the idea of ceasing to do evil, not causing the breaking of relationships. As I begin to think about that in my own life, it's not only that I can cause a break in a relationship because I argue with somebody or do something that leads to the relationship breaking, I can also break that relationship by what I don't do, by ignoring it, by letting it go.

And then, to try to do well with one another. I don't want to be there, but I need to be there. Do you ever feel that way? I don't want to go to that particular event, but it's important to the people that I care about so I go. I'm part of it. How many times do we struggle with those kinds of things? I don't like to go to movies, but my friend does. There are all kinds of ways in our lives that we can think about how we are dealing with our relationships. Sometimes, it feels like somebody has an irrational fear and we want to say, "Get over it!" Is that helpful?

It's trying to begin to understand the experience of another and pay attention in a way that allows us to deal with our relationships well, creating or seeking right relationships and then paying particular attention to those people who feel captivated, bound by something in their lives, particularly the bonds that keep people from being the people God created them to be. Each of us has our own unique ways of being. Whenever we try to squash that uniqueness, I think there's some level of oppression, captivatedness. How do we encourage one another?

How do we defend the defenseless? When somebody feels defenseless, they don't feel secure. How do we help bring security to each other?

How do we deal with it when someone doesn't feel like they can say anything because it doesn't matter? Who will give voice to the voiceless?

If that's not hard enough to think about in my own particular life—and I struggle with all of those things—Isaiah is not just speaking to an individual. He's speaking to a nation. Here's something that ups the ante a little bit. It is in some way the way we all live together as we try individually, but as a group as well, to live this out. He's speaking to a nation. He's speaking to our church, a community of faith. How many times do we talk about "the church is this way?" There's a way in which who we are together becomes something special: people of God.

When Isaiah started, he said "hear" and "listen." I titled the sermon "Hear the Word" because when Isaiah said hear and listen, from an Old Testament perspective, the word *shema* is to hear. You might recognize the way it's said sometimes—Hear, O Israel--that famous *shema* passage about remembering. *Shema*, hear, doesn't just mean to have it come in our ears, not just an auditory experience. It doesn't mean it just registers as something we've heard. It means it's something that not only have we heard, but something that has sunk in. Something that we've not only heard, but we've thought about. Not only something that we've heard and thought about, but something that begins to change who we are. Not only something that we've heard, and thought about, and that changes who we are, but begins to be expressed in the lives we lead.

Isaiah and Jesus express a direction. I know the passage made me think about how I'm doing following that direction. How are we doing? Amen.

Gracious God, you care about your people so much that you pay attention to what we're doing. You pay attention to how we come before you, the way we assemble, the way we leave, and what we do with our lives. It's important to you how we are together, what we become: a community, a church, a nation. Guide us. Help us look to your guidance. Help us cease doing that which breaks. Help us do well with one another, create those right relationships and try to remove those captivating boxes, defending the defenseless and giving voice to the voiceless. Help us hear your word. Let it be that which guides our lives. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.