

The Reason We are Here
A Sermon on Isaiah 1:11-20 by the Rev. Philip Major
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One of the gifts of the Hebrew Scriptures is that we have been given a tradition of self-reflection and repentance. The religion of the Hebrew Scriptures is self-critical. We see this theme carried forward and given new, powerful expression in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus is constantly exhorting his disciples to be self-critical, to examine their intentions and actions.

The prophet Isaiah is in the center of this tradition of self-reflection and self-criticism. Let's take a few minutes to consider the context for the first chapter of Isaiah.

The time was 740 years before the birth of Christ. The nation of Israel was near the end of three centuries of relative prosperity and security, beginning with the reign of King Saul, continuing through King David and many of the kings that followed David for about 250 years.

Israel was a tiny nation, about one quarter the size of the state of New York. Israel was much smaller, and much less powerful than Egypt to the west, Assyria to the north, and Babylon to the east. But much of the land of Israel was fertile. Many farmers in Israel had reliable rainfall and other sources of water for their crops and herds. So Israel, especially the Northern Kingdom of Israel, was a place of security and prosperity for hundreds of years.

Yet, in the year 740 BC, Israel was entering a period when the nation would fall apart and be conquered. There were three fundamental issues for Israel as Isaiah began his work as a prophet. The first was that the nation had been divided against itself for a very long time. Israel had been divided into two kingdoms, north and south, which were often in conflict. Sometimes this conflict actually became physical and violent. The second fundamental issue for Israel was that there was an enormous divide between the rich and the poor. The third fundamental issue for Israel during the time of Isaiah was that religious practices had become a way of wielding and accumulating power.

This is Isaiah's primary focus in our passage for today. *What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.* The rich are bringing enormous, fat animals to be sacrificed at the Temple, but they are not bringing them with intentions of thanksgiving and repentance. They are bringing enormous bulls to sacrifice as a way of wielding their power.

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more. This is shocking language. God is saying, "Don't come into this house of worship anymore!" *Bringing offerings is futile; your offerings of incense are an abomination to me. I cannot endure anymore of your elaborate festivals: New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation, what will you come up with next? Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me.*

Just in case there is any confusion, let's be very clear. God is extremely upset. The sins that have been committed are not minor infractions. The sins are the worst kind of sins. The terrible sin is that, for these people, religious practices have become performative. In other words, people are doing all of the religious practices in order to be seen *doing the religious practices*. In God's eyes, this is not a minor problem.

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. 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.

God is concerned for the orphans and the widows, but there is more to it than orphans and widows. In ancient Israel the concern for the orphan and widow had to do with their condition in

life, which was that they were poor and powerless. God is concerned for those who are powerless. God is concerned for the poor. God is concerned for those who are unable to protect themselves.

The similarities between Isaiah's context and ours are striking. Like Israel we have enjoyed a long period of security and prosperity. Like Isaiah, we see many parts of our world crumbling around us. The rich are getting much richer and the poor are getting poorer.

As in Isaiah's time, many people in America in 2022 are using religion as a way to wield their power and as a way to accumulate power. Many people are doing many religious things for the wrong reason. Many people are using religion as a tool to accumulate and use power to control others. Many people are using religion as a tool to help the rich get richer and keep the poor in their place.

This is precisely the sin, that is the big mistake, that Isaiah is warning against. More and more in the news we see videos and photos of politicians at political rallies with religious people praying for more power for those who already wield tremendous power. This is not the purpose of prayer. If these people were actually praying they would be praying for the purpose of admitting their mistakes. People who engage in prayer are self-critical. As far as I can tell, the people who engage in these public prayers are not self-critical. And God replies, *I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.*

A few days ago a member of congress declared that she is Christian Nationalist. I have news for her. There are no Christian Nationalists. Many people use the expression, but the expression is meaningless. There is no such thing as a Christian Nationalist because one cannot be both Christian and Nationalist at the same time.

The phrase Christian Nationalist makes as much sense as the phrase: *rich poor person*. That doesn't make sense. A person can have a lot of money in the bank, or a person can be poor, but a person cannot be both. There is no such thing as a Christian Nationalist because the fundamental teaching of Christ is that we are not divided but race or nation of origin or anything else. Let's recall that when someone asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan, meaning that people of other nations are just as worthy of the title, 'neighbor'. The fundamental teaching of Christ is that we are all one people, that is, we are all God's people. In God's eyes there are no divisions between us.

So a person can be a Christian, that is a person who actually follows the teachings of Christ about loving our neighbors, including our neighbors of other nations and races. Or a person can be a nationalist. It is not possible to be both Christian and Nationalist at the same time. It is this kind of distortion of religion that is focal point for Isaiah's message.

Sometimes people pursue practices that look like religious practices for all of the wrong reasons. So we remember the reason we are here. We are not here in order to pray. We are not here to listen and reflect on Holy Scripture. We are not here to receive communion. We are not here to sing hymns. All of those things can be very good things, but they are the actually the tools God has given us. The point is to use the tools God has given us, to use the prayers, the communion, the Holy Scripture for the sake of love.

We are here in order that something inside us would be profoundly changed by God's love. We are here in order that the love God has placed in the center of our lives would be strengthened. We are here in order that each one of our intentions would become an intention to love and empower others. We are here in order that each one of our actions would reflect God's love.