

Sermon 5th February 2023

In today's scripture lesson there are several themes that avail themselves to us. When I attempted to write the first draft of this sermon I was bombarded by potential sermons and honestly I could have written four or five on this passage alone.

But I had to pick a pathway forward and so we shall go down the pathway of the dark and the light. Because the part of this passage that sticks out to me most clearly is that last two verses. Isaiah here delivers a clear message to the Israelites to turn from their current pattern of behavior and follow God's word of them.

Isaiah has worked in an alter call to his message and one that I would like to explore a little bit. Because the words he uses here are interesting and evocative. And to make it interesting I want to look at it in contrast to some of our favorite disciples as seen in the Gospel of John where darkness and light play a strong role.

The first line Isaiah says, "Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant?" We spoke a few weeks back at the men's group about fear in the Bible. We discussed whether or not the word fear in the scriptures is really the same kind of fear that we tend to discuss. When Jesus died the disciples were afraid for their lives. When Isaiah asks if we fear the Lord, it is different. It's about honor, it's about a sense of awe, it's a culturally and linguistically difficult piece of information to parse out. It can be translated as a feeling of reverence, but even that feel a little out of place.

Obeying the word of his servant though, now that's a sentence we can get behind. In this one of many of Isaiah's servant songs, he is likely referencing himself in this message. As he earlier in the passage declared that God has given him a well instructed tongue, and his ear is wakened by God each morning. To Isaiah's audience we hear him asking if anyone still is reverent to their God and listening to him.

To us, the modern listeners we often think of Jesus in relation to the servant songs. But it doesn't make it any less powerful. Who amongst us still has reverence for God and listens to his son? Even Jesus most ardent followers who were speaking with him on a daily basis would act in ways that were tone deaf to Jesus' wishes. They want to send away the crowd that our children learned about last week, instead of feeding them, they deny parents entry to Christ to have their children blessed by him. The disciples regularly act in ways that do not show their obedience to Christ.

Now this next part of the verse is probably my favorite part. Because Isaiah says, "Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God." Isaiah is outright saying, you who do not believe, and do not listen. Trust in the name of the Lord, rely on God! And he follows this up with saying that those who are not trusting and not listening, are lighting their own fires blazing torches, and will only receive misery for rejecting God's light.

Again, we are immediately drawn to Christ when we think of this message, and Isaiah might have been talking about Jesus, but maybe he was talking about the ruling class and their own arrogance of following their thoughts and beliefs rather than listening to God's message for them.

I want to talk about how this theme is relevant for us and is displayed in John's Gospel in a few ways. Because John uses light and dark as well, in almost the exact same way that Isaiah uses it here. John shows characters who do not know Christ, or do not believe him, in night time scenes. Jesus is arrested in the pitch of night around 3-4 AM. Nicodemus who does not understand Christ's message meetings him under cover of darkness and is standing with him in the light at the end when Jesus is crucified providing for his burial. It is a brilliant way of depicting Christ's influence in the world and for us.

Peter when he denies Christ, denies him in the darkness just before dawn. Before the cock crows. But Peter in the end sits with Jesus on the shore and they talk it out in the early dawn light. Where he is fed fish by the fire.

We see biblical figures who all the time are being pulled away from God in one form or another. Isaiah here describes it as lighting fires, and providing yourselves with flaming torches. In other stories we see it in the form of greed, when King David wants the woman he can spy from his balcony. It shows in the form of fear when Peter cowers in the dark. It shows in the form of desire to be held in higher honor with Ananias and Saphira. It is present in those who think they have a better plan than God in the form of our prophet Jonah and the general Barak.

The story comes to us time and time again so why are we surprised when we find in our own lives that we are lacking in light. Why are we shocked and dismayed when we find ourselves in darkness yet again, like all of our iconic biblical leaders.

I think there is a social element of shame to it. We feel we are at fault. That we have made a mistake. And sometimes we have focusing on keeping our flames lit, spending too much time on work, giving in to our vices, putting other priorities over our time spent with God and with the community of Christ.

But in our Gospel of John, we see that even after the darkness, dawn arrives. Christ's brilliance is there to shine for us, and to forgive us and grant us grace.

Even Isaiah says without any prompting, that those who walk in darkness, who lack not just light but radiance. As the Hebrew word *nogah* more accurately translated would read. Those who lack the radiance of God within them, he does not condemn, he does not disparage, he does not claim doom upon them. He simply instructs them to trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God.

Isaiah knows that following God's path is difficult. He and Christ both walk in pathways full of public ridicule and shame. Yet both are found blameless before God. Isaiah is aware that it takes effort and is difficult to have a well trained disciples tongue. He does not say it at the beginning of this passage to brag or to boast. But to assure you dear listener that his words are true and you too can be among the faithful. Full of brilliance, relying upon God.

Christ extends the same invitation to us in the new testament. To trust in his words, to believe in his name, to rely upon God in everything we do.

While we do not face anywhere the same level of public shame or ridicule for following God that Isaiah faced it can still be hard for us to make time or feel like we are living up to God's name.

So I want to assure you today. That the good news of our text is this. God wants to be in relationship with you. God wants you to trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon him. There is no shame in coming today or tomorrow, in year gone past or in years to come. God's radiance belongs to all of us. We do not need to risk burning ourselves up in the fires that are begotten by this world.

Instead, let God's radiant light illuminate your pathway forward. Taking all the time you need to answer God's calling to you.

This is the word of our Lord.
Thanks be to God

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