

“Let Us Argue It Out”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Isaiah 1:1, (2-9), 10-20; Luke 12:32-34

Richard E. Otty
August 7, 2016

This morning, we are opening the book of Isaiah, a sixty-six chapter book covering a span of about two hundred years of Israel's history. This is the time Israel was exiled in Bablyon, and Isaiah offers prophecies of warming and hope to the people before, during, and following that exile; thus, what we refer to as first, second and third Isaiah.

In the first chapter, we are reading the flyleaf summary Isaiah, as one might do in a bookstore to find out the theme or ideas presented. The prophet will outline God's displeasure for Israel, with warnings to change. Near the end we will hear of God's desire to argue things out, with a promise of forgiving, cleansing, gracious hope.

Our reading focuses on the temple ritual of animal sacrifice, which involved burning on the altar, either entire animals or just the fat, leaving roasted meat for the people to share. Such sacrifices were thought to be pleasing to God, whose nostrils would enjoy the smell of roasted meat as it rose to the heavens.

As we will hear, God rejects such attempts to please when care for orphans and widows are ignored. Let's listen now to God's word to us in Isaiah 1:

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; 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. ¹²When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; ¹³bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. ¹⁴Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵When 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.

¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. ¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. ¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

My focus this morning will be on the Isaiah reading, so I have shortened the Gospel lection to three verses. Within them is the familiar treasure and heart couplet by Jesus offers as a means of measuring our priorities in life and living. Let us hear Luke 12:32-34:

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The desire to please gods with roasting meat is an ancient custom Israel has built into its rituals. Isn't it interesting the smells the gods would like just happened to be the same humans find alluring. From our Isaiah lesson one senses that no matter what they did, the people of Israel thought they could lure back God's good graces with a juicy steak on the barbeque altar.

Vegetarians might find some hope in Isaiah's message that God is not biting on the carnivore lure; yet, it is quickly made clear God's concern is with empty ritual, not red meat. "Trample my courts no more," is a command to bring an end to the charade of burning animal carcasses and believing God was pleased with the people. God sees past such smokescreens.

God's displeasure is the growing disparity between rich and poor, privileged and powerless, prosperous and penniless. That the same disparity continues today should not be an indicator God displeasure has tempered, and thus I find this prophecy as relevant today as it was 2,500 years ago.

Part of Isaiah's audience included the rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrah, though the sin outlined is not what we might expect in pairing Sodom and Gomorrah. The prophet Ezekiel, who himself was exiled in Babylon, summarizes Sodom's sin as follows: *This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.*

Pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and no compassion and care for the poor and needy. These are the charges against Israel. Again, some thought adherence to ritual, the smell of grilled meat would please and appease God. They were wrong. It did not.

The people thought they were making accommodation for the poor, even in this ritual. Yet, while the poor could substitute a pigeon rather than bring a lamb or cow, purchasing the bird in the temple courts was still more of a burden on them than those with the resources to bring a whole animal. Also, in those sacrifices where only the fat was burnt and there was meat to eat, there were times only the rich and the priests would receive this benefit. Thus the sacrifice rituals put an extra burden on the poor, and our lesson makes clear, if it puts a burden on the poor, it also puts a burden on God.

Though we no longer practice ritual sacrifice, I think there is still a message for us in Isaiah's words, coupled with Jesus' heart and treasure teaching. Yet, let's first consider how rituals can be good. As we read in our prayer of confession, ritual can be an anchor on the restless sea we call life. Rituals and disciplines can provide us with a sense of order. When we tithe, we set aside at least 10% of our income for work we believe is consistent with God's desires – and we do not dip into that 10% for our desires or cravings. A good ritual. The ritual of attending church is important for many, and some make a special effort to be present when we celebrate the Communion. We have other daily or weekly rituals that give us a sense of stability for our day – our morning and evening prayers, even our coffee or shower, our weekly phone call with a relative or our monthly dinner with friends. Rituals can bring good order and discipline to our lives.

Popular author Anne Rice once made headlines when she announced she was giving up Christianity, and the reason was one that resonates with Isaiah – the church had turned its back on its core calls to serve the poor. Yet, I recall when asked what she would miss about the church, she did not hesitate to say she would miss the order and beauty of the Mass, and the receiving of the Eucharist – in other words, the ritual. Still, she concluded she could not be faithful to her beliefs if she participated in such rituals without sensing the church was being true to its mission.

Given this is the sixtieth anniversary of the ordination of women as pastors in the Presbyterian Church, I have read back on the debates leading to that decision. It turns out, there were those in favor of ordaining women who left the church because it took too long to approve, and there were those against who left because the church was even considering such approval. Yet, most, on both sides, stayed to “argue it out,” to debate the merits based on Scripture and tradition. Once the decision was made to ordain women, many who opposed the decision stayed in the church, trusting the Spirit had been at work reforming the church.

God tells the people of Israel through Isaiah, “Come now, let us argue it out.” God will argue how the people’s tradition of temple sacrifice has evolved into a self-justifying ritual. In other words, they have misconstrued adherence to temple practice as faithfulness, assuming they were fulfilling God’s desires. In Jesus’ words, ritual has become their treasure, and thus the place of their heart. Where your treasure is begs the honest question, what is it I treasure?

Israel treasured its rituals of sacrifice in worship. For us it may be our good rituals, and even our worship, that have become shallow and barren, and unpleasing to God if care and compassion do not pervade the foundation of the church.

“Your ritual,” God says, “has become a burden to me.” There is a call to cease to do evil and learn to do good. Then, Isaiah clarifies the good and evil definitions. God footnotes the commands to cease doing evil and learn to do good with specifics: to seek justice, to rescue the oppressed, to defend the orphan, and to plead for the widow.

The argument God wants to have with Israel is not how well they have performed their rituals, but how the child left parentless is doing. The aroma pleasing to God is an orphaned child receiving adequate food each day. The aroma pleasing to God is a refugee child saved at sea and sheltered in safety, and not only sheltered but welcomed as God would.

The argument God wants to have with Israel is not how well they have performed their rituals, but how women, with no power in that culture, and often destitute when their husbands died, have been cared for by the community of faith. The incense smell God welcomes is an assurance the widow will not lose her home, and will have the resources needed to care for her household. The aroma pleasing to God is care for the single mother on food stamps, or the homeless family seeking work, without tacking on the adjective “deserving” when speaking of the poor.

By entering the argument with God means allowing God to evaluate any way our good ritual, our pleasing praise, even lifted to God in worship, can become a smokescreen for our lack of compassion. In short, one cannot praise Jesus in church and ignore Jesus on the street.

The tough good news is Jesus' treasure and heart couplet seems more demanding than the empty ritual text of Isaiah. Jesus tells us, God's pleasure is to give us the kingdom. Yet, to receive it, he says, "sell everything and give alms to those in need." No trickle-down economics with Jesus.

I think Jesus may be saying, to find out where your heart is, look at your checkbook and credit card statements. Is your church pledge as least as great as your cable and wireless bills? Do you give as much to the food pantry as you pay for pet food and care? And even, do your politics demand a priority for care of the poor rather than the rich, or even the middle class?

God wants to argue it out with us, which I find a frightening prospect; on the other hand, it can also be an assurance we are still in the game. Let's willingly place before God our rituals, our definitions of goodness, even our good works. Let's subject them to God's evaluation. The gracious hope God has is for the people to once again eat the good of their own land, but only if the poorest among them are sharing equally in the harvest. That is the acceptable sacrifice. In Isaiah, it is the people's choice. I suspect it is still our choice today.