



Sermon Growth Guide

November 27, 2022

The Great Rescue - The Peril

Isaiah 1:2-6, 11-20

Key Verse: Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

Big Idea: God wants your heart, not your lip service.

Foundations

Advent begins today, which also launches us into our new sermon series, ***The Great Rescue***.

This Advent, our sermon series spins around ***The Great Rescue*** as told throughout Isaiah. Some presume Christmas is mere ornaments and reindeer. God's people proclaim a different message: Christmas celebrates the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, God inaugurating His rescue plan of redemption by sending Jesus to conquer sin. Heaven's invasion has come; the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Did this Great Rescue come up out of thin air, with no warning? Unlike any event in human history, the arrival of the Messiah was foretold for thousands of years. Generation after generation, the clear and consistent word was echoed: one is coming who will rescue.

We begin in Isaiah chapter one, a loud and clear reminder that the state in which we find ourselves is perilous.

Open your time together in prayer. Thank God that “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”

Check in with one another. What is the holiday season like for each of you? How can you care, serve and encourage one another through this holiday season?

Understanding God's Word

Together, read Isaiah 1:2-6, 11-20.

Identify phrases within today's passage that seem especially vivid to you.

In verses 13-15, what is God feeling? Why is God feeling this way?

What is promised in verse 18?

Applying God's Word

Isaiah 1 reminds us that God hates fake (to employ this lively verb from verse 14!). God desires sincerity: His holiness requires truth in full measure. God is holy and wants your heart, not your lip service.

Is Isaiah 1 unapplicable to your life? Or can you identify aspects of your faith that are not fully given over to the Lord? How might your Life Group help you walk in even greater faithfulness to God?

Witnessing God's Word

Host a conversation about how God's witness is helped or hurt by how God's people live their lives.

How might your Life Group even better reflect the faithfulness and sincerity of God to those you see this week.

What do you think—does society need saving?

One headline on my global news app reads, “Americans celebrate Thanksgiving under shadow of two more mass shootings.” “Two more”—that’s a commonplace phrase. May I have two more slices? Two more mass shootings. The article cites the Gun Violence Archive who claim our nation has seen over 600 mass shootings this year. “Two more.” Over 600 too many. Last weekend’s Club Q shooting rocked our city. Tim’s words sent out to us all through *The Weekly* sum it up so well: “We are one city and what happens to any of us happens to all of us. We weep with those who weep, lament with those who have suffered violence, and call for prayers of peace, healing and mercy.”

What do you think—do our relational circumstances need saving? Just this year, among my own friendships I’ve been hit with fatal accidental drug overdose, failing school, domestic violence, marital infidelity leading to divorce, and stage 4 pancreatic cancer. But this isn’t isolated to just me, is it? It’s us, it’s you and me and everyone in this room. Each of us has our own unique list of pain, but we’re all in it. It’s the whole world, because the whole world is infected with a sickness, a “sickness unto death” to say it like Kierkegaard.

Our text today, though, isn’t about *society*—and God knows society needs saving. Our text today, though, isn’t about *relational circumstances*—and God knows relational circumstances needs saving. Here’s the thing: it’s so easy to focus on the “out there” stuff around us. The “out there” stuff is there and important and tied into who we are. I’m not wanting to diminish any of that, but watch how Scripture today proclaims loud and clear that *there is an inside to who you are and it is paramount and it must be tended to*. Our text today addresses the pain *within* our very center, our very core. *Our very core is sick*. Our very core has its own “sickness unto death” and unless we lean in and address this sickness it’s not our society or our relationships we risk losing, it’s our souls, our eternal selves. This morning we’re in Isaiah chapter 1. The words, roughly in the middle of the Bible, will be on the screen and I hope you’ll open them for yourself on your lap. Let’s prepare to receive God’s Word.

Prayer: “God, I thank you that you weep with those who weep. We beseech you to bring healing and salvation to *our society*. Thank you for the time we’ve spent in prayer already in our worship this morning for the Club Q community. And too we beseech you to bring healing into the *relational circumstances* around us. To us all, Lord, bring your healing. O Holy One of Israel, Advent is here. Open us up to your holiness, our lack of holiness, and your desire to conform us to the image of your son, in

whose name, Jesus, we come before you. Amen.

Read: Isaiah 1:2-6, 11-20.

This is prophetic literature. Biblical prophetic literature is marked by *shocking realism* and total honesty. By shocking realism, I mean that the language is strong. Listen to verses four through six again. Strong, shocking realism. And this is very intentional. The prophets speak against the wind of the cultural norms. If the prophets use culturally acceptable language, ear-tickling language, they won’t be heard. Their words will be caught in the wind and lost. There is a science and an art to proclaiming the Word of the Lord to people who are marked, in part, by spiritual deafness. Preachers in America have been learning this skill afresh for the past two generations at least. And not just preachers. Every committed believer is learning this skill of proclaiming the gospel into the wind currents of cultural shifting. And we must! For we who have received the eternal grace of God cannot help but try and help others do the same. Our next Alpha launches in January. Be thinking of who you can invite into a space where the topic of the hour is to be real and ask the real questions on your heart. Our text uses shocking realism, the language is strong, but it’s also totally honest.

By *total honesty* I mean that within biblical prophetic literature it is not the prophet’s responsibility to water down the truth. If God tells the prophet, “I cannot bear your worthless assemblies,” as he does in verse 13, the prophet must tell the people, “God cannot bear your worthless assemblies.” The prophet cannot, under the banner of politeness or political correctness or a false sense of what it means to be a friend, reframe God’s words and say, “Friends, we might be able to offer God an even more meaningful assembly.” That’s not what God said! God said, “I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.” Repackaging God’s word to feel more gentle is like trying to throw a paper airplane against a strong wind. It doesn’t work! The watered-down word gets lost in the wind, pummeled by the wind! That would not be faithfully communicating what God has spoken.

So we’re dealing with prophetic literature here. In Isaiah chapter one, we find that God does three things: pronounces judgment, pleads for correction, and promises salvation.

God *pronounces judgment*. The first 10 verses (1:2-6, 11-15) of our passage today detail God’s *critique* of His people. Recall what God is up to. God has chosen Israel to spread His salvation throughout the earth. *In this choosing there is calling*. Israel is to walk in the way of the Lord. In short, this is a call to holiness. God is holy. God is described in verse

4 as “The Holy One of Israel.” To be holy is to be *other*. Allow me to share with you these words from theologian Dr. John Oswalt at length:

“God is the Holy One. There is no other God for (Israel). He is the only one who is truly Other and thus deserving of their worship. But his otherness is not merely a matter of essence; it is also a matter of character. The otherness of this God is distinctively moral. Thus to act immorally (as Israel is acting) is a particular affront to him, and to forsake him is to be doomed to act immorally. But he is not merely the Holy One; he is the Holy One of Israel. This altogether good One, the only almighty One, has committed himself to Israel, and Israel’s response has been an almost causal rejection of him.”

Israel is called to holiness. Israel forsakes the Holy One. “They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him” (verse 4b). Our English translation “forsakes” points to the Hebrew word, “Azab,” which is elsewhere translated “divorce.” God loves Israel. Israel files for divorce. Scripture’s greatest image for what is going on here is the story of Hosea and Gomer. The book of Hosea opens, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.” God is faithful and, in return, God’s people give themselves away to lesser gods.

“Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the Lord has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (v. 2-3). God’s people are contrasted with ox and donkey and who do you imagine comes out on top? In God’s gift of agency and free will, humanity has fallen lower than a donkey. At this level, the ox and donkey know truth better than we. We presume to have knowledge and understanding, but we don’t even know to whom we belong or who we can trust for all of our needs.

The verbs in verse 6 are war language, bleeding out language. The Hebrew “pesa” and “habbura” and “makka”—slash wounds, lacerations, heavy bleeding. “From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with olive oil.” You’re a mess, Israel. You’re bleeding out in front of me and it’s of your own doing.

What’s God’s tone in all this? When you try and hear God’s voice, what tone do you attach to it? Is God happy about his people’s unfaithfulness? Is God out-for-blood furious? Or is God a tell-it-like-it-is

God because He loves us and doesn’t want to watch us die in our own sin.

God’s pronouncement of judgment continues in verses 11-15, but here it turns to highlighting the *hypocrisy of Israel’s worship*. What’s pictured so clearly in these verses is *endless religious activity, but zero sincerity*. “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.” We’ve spread out a banquet of ritual, a table lined with insincerity, and God says He doesn’t want any of it. He’s hungry for something else. God desires a different kind of banquet, another menu entirely made up of sincere worship through a contrite heart that flows from an ethical life that reflects His moral character.

God is weighed down by all the insincerity His people are bringing to Him: “When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood!” (v. 12-15). Improper worship is burdening God down and He hates it. He won’t listen to His people anymore, not in this state. What about us today? Have we ever been guilty of *endless religious activity, but lacking in offering our whole hearts to the Lord in full sincerity? Have we burdened the Holy One of Israel with lip service and action that is absent of sincerity?*

After God pronounces judgment, he *pleads for correction*. “Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow” (v. 16-17).

This call to ethical living is central throughout the prophetic literature. Though he was commenting on one of his favorite verses in Amos, listen to how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sums up this call to right living: “(the prophetic literature) reveals the deep ethical nature of God. God is a God that demands justice rather than sacrifice, righteousness rather than ritual. The most elaborate worship is but an insult to God when offered by those who have no mind to conform to his ethical demands. Certainly this is one of the most noble ideas ever uttered by the human mind.” (*The Papers of Martin Luther King*,

165) In other words, God is crying out to His people saying, “be holy.” “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy’” (Leviticus 19:1-2).

I think if you’re in that original assembly hearing this sermon from Isaiah, your head drops. You know good and well you can’t do it. You can’t be holy. You can’t live up to “the Holy One of Israel.” He is pure and good and loving and faithful. He has no drop of sin in Him. When He hates, He hates only what ought to be hated, that which is truly evil. When He loves, He loves purely and perfectly. When He laughs, He laughs with true gladness. When He weeps, it is not for something wrong He has done, but something we have done against Him. I think if you’re in that original assembly hearing this sermon from Isaiah chapter 1, you begin to be tempted to sink into despair. There is nothing in you nor is there anything in all of the nation that can make things right. You have nothing within yourself to turn your hypocritical religiosity into true, sincere worship of your Creator. I think of the words Joshua spoke to Israel: “Joshua said to the people, ‘You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God’” (Joshua 24:19a). You see the problem, don’t you? God says, “be holy,” but we can’t. We’re too prone to wander.

God continues to speak through Isaiah in verses 18-20: “Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” How can this be? I can’t make my sins disappear. I know what I’ve done! And every time I try I just end up sinning all the more! God will continue to speak through Isaiah. God begins to proclaim not judgment, but restoration throughout the book of Isaiah. This is the pattern for biblical prophetic literature. Judgment is never the final word. Restoration is the final word. But how is restoration possible? We’ve blown it so bad and we can’t save ourselves. What else is there to say? With God, all things are possible, amen? The book of Isaiah builds and builds and builds, and finally we come to one the greatest pieces of prophecy in the entire Scripture, recorded around 700 years before Christ:

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed... Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin... he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge

my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities (Isaiah 53:4-5, 10-11).

God pronounces judgment in verses 1-15, God pleads for correction in verses 16 and 17, and now God promises salvation in verse 18. God promises salvation, not judgment, as the final word. Someone needs to hear this this morning: *God’s final word to you is not judgment, but everlasting restoration, only believe.* Prophecies went forth for centuries leading up to the Christ child being born, arriving, “adventing” here. Jesus Christ made claims to eternal kingship. Jesus Christ lived a perfect life, a life that perfectly mirrored the Holy One of Israel. Jesus Christ was the long-awaited suffering servant of Isaiah 53 who would “justify many.” Jesus Christ was slain as a sin offering for the life of the world. Jesus Christ was resurrected because death has no claim over true holiness. Jesus Christ reigns forevermore as the justified and the justifier. And Jesus Christ is building His eternal family. “If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” For the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (v. 19-20). Only believe. Only cry out to God. Only let your cry be followed by an “amen” of joining the Spirit’s work and desire of conforming your actions to mirror the life of Christ.

Imagine all the pain our *society* is going through, mass shootings and everything else. Imagine Jesus moving His Great Rescue into this battleground.

Imagine all the pain of my *friends* that I mentioned earlier: fatal accidental drug overdose, failing school, domestic violence, marital infidelity leading to divorce, and stage 4 pancreatic cancer. What is your pain? What burdens are you carrying? Imagine Jesus moving His Great Rescue into *your* battleground.

Wait this Advent for the arrival of the King. His character is pure and His power is unmatched. The only questions remaining are: Will you receive Him? Will you adore Him? Will you worship Him in sincerity and truth? *Will you trade hypocritical religiosity for true, sincere worship? Will you trade endless religious activity for right ethical living marked by a passionate pursuit for Kingdom justice? Will you render to Him your heart and not your lip service?*

Let’s pray. God, you are the Holy One of Israel. Rid from us religiosity that is activity without sincerity. Turn our hearts to you this Advent. Teach us how to walk according to your name. It is for your name and your renown that we are gathered this morning. Now send us out to proclaim your salvation through word *and deed*. In Jesus’ mighty name, amen.