

ADVENT 2017 (ISAIAH)

Part 2: “God Confronts Us to Save Us”

Isaiah 1:1-4; 10-18

Sunday December 10, 2017 (The 2nd Sunday of Advent)

By David A. Ritchie

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: ‘Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged....’

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ‘What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread 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 deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD: ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool’” (Isaiah 1:1-4; 10–18, ESV).

Merciful God, [You sent your] messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who [lives] and [reigns] with [You the Father] and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.¹

I. Introduction – The Confrontation of the Kingdom of God

Advent is a season meant to stir our hearts to the awesome reality that God’s kingdom is coming. God’s kingdom is a conquering light that shines in the darkness. His kingdom is an unfailing hope for the hopeless. But make no mistake: God’s kingdom is also an unflinching confrontation against the kingdoms of this world. And it is a confrontation to our hearts when our hearts enchanted by the kingdoms of this world.

¹ The Episcopal Church, [*The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church*](#) (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2007), 159.

The words of the prophet Isaiah here in chapter 1 are divine words of confrontation. And indeed, God told Isaiah on the day that he was called into ministry that he would have to speak some very hard truth to God's people.

Last week we beheld the profound moment of Isaiah's call (Isa. 6:1-8). As he prays through his fears and mourns for his nation in the temple, Isaiah's eyes are unveiled to see the glory and power of the majestic God who rules over all creation. Angels fly around the divine throne, worshipping with holy and eternal zeal. The foundations of the earth quake. Smoke envelops the atmosphere. Isaiah is overwhelmed with terror and awe. He feels utterly unworthy and undone before the glory of God. But an angel flies to the altar of heaven, and, with tongs, picks a burning coal to press to Isaiah's mouth. At once, Isaiah is filled with cleansing and courage, so that when God asks the question of "Whom shall I send to speak my words to my people?" Isaiah says, "Here am I. Send me."

Now that is an epic call to ministry. However, the rest of the chapter gives us a good idea that Isaiah's ministry will not be sunshine and rainbows. In fact, this is how God predicts Isaiah's message will be received: *"And he said, 'Go, and say to this people: Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed"* (Isaiah 6:9-10, ESV).

In other words, God says to Isaiah, "The good news is I am going to call you to the awesome privilege of speaking my words – the words of the Creator God who made all things. The bad news is no one is going to want to hear what I have to say. In fact, simply by saying my words, you will harden hearts, deafen ears, and close eyes to the truth."

This isn't the most encouraging call into ministry. Upfront the prophet knows that he will suffer rejection. Isaiah is commissioned to speak truth people do not want to hear; he is called to confront idols that people do not want to acknowledge.

But this confrontational message is not Isaiah's – it is God's. As verse chapter, verse two says: *"for the LORD has spoken."*²

God's people did not want a God who would confront or challenge them in any way. And today, it is still a human tendency not to want a God who would confront or challenge us in any way. We would prefer it if our God and those who speak his word would simply affirm what we already want to be true. But make no mistake. A god that is not allowed to confront or challenge you is not the real God. Rather a god that is not allowed to confront you is a god of your own making and a golden calf.

This is where the words of a chapter like Isaiah one are so helpful and so relevant. They are like smelling salts that rouse us from spiritual slumber. God's words are still a confrontation. But God's doesn't confront us to harm us or shame us. *"God Confronts Us to Save Us."*

III. Text – God Confronts Judah

As we walk through Isaiah 1, I would like to unfold three ways in which God confronts us: **1.) God**

² J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 50.

Confronts our Lack of Self-Awareness, 2.) God Confronts our Lack of Sincerity, and 3.) God Confronts our Lack of Love.

1.) God Confronts our Lack of Self-Awareness.

God gives Isaiah a “vision” (וִיזוֹן). Isaiah’s words are thus a new way of seeing, a new God-ward perspective on reality (1:1).³

This is needed because the people of Judah an unrealistic appraisal of themselves.⁴ It is like the early part of American Idol auditions when people come in thinking they are awesome, but in reality they are awful. They need the mirror of God’s word to reveal the reality about themselves so that they can grasp the reality of God. As John Calvin famously taught: we need to know ourselves to know God.⁵

But the people of Judah do not know the true reality of their spiritual condition and they do not know God: *“The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged”* (Isaiah 1:3–4, ESV).

God is saying, “You think you know me, but you don’t know me; you think we’re good – we’re not. You think you’re good – your not.”⁶

But why is God so mad? As one Isaiah scholar has written, if we don’t know the context, we miss the nature of Isaiah’s message. It would be like listening to only one side of a phone call.⁷ So we have to understand the situation Isaiah speaking into.

At the time of Isaiah’s ministry, in Judah there was a strong sense of pride of being God’s people living in God’s country. However, Judah was living far beneath there call to be God’s faithful people. It

³ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 18.

⁴ “The people of Isaiah’s day had an unrealistic appraisal of themselves, with little awareness of their own fatal salvations.” Ibid., 21.

⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁶ “The *earth* yields her fruits; the sea flows not beyond her settled boundaries; the sun, moon, and stars perform their courses; the *heavens*, too, revolve at stated periods; and all with wonderful accuracy, though they are destitute of reason and understanding. But man, endued with reason and understanding, in whose ears and in whose heart the voice of God frequently sounds, remains unmoved, like one bereft of his senses, and cannot bend the neck to submit to him.” John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 39.

⁷ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 25.

was an increasingly anxious time the Kingdom of Judah was becoming weaker and weaker, and the Assyria Empire to the north was becoming more and more powerful by the day. Instead of trusting in the Lord for wisdom and protection, Judah was entertaining the notion of making an alliance with the wicked and immoral empire of Assyria in order to have a sense of peace, security, and significance in an increasingly hostile and uncertain situation

Now this was a big no-no. God's people were not permitted by the law of entering into covenants with other nations, because God did not want his people to be negatively influenced toward immorality and false gods. Judah was called to be faithful to their covenant with God and to be God's distinct people. But instead of being distinct from the world God's people were making an alliance with the world. To this mentality God says, "You must not know I am the God who set slaves free and split the Red Sea!"

God's word to Judah is God's word to us: the power of the world will not save you. To seek security and salvation in a kingdom of man instead of God isn't just bad foreign policy – it's idolatry.

This is why if you read through the long chapters of the long book of Isaiah, you will see most of the book is God foretelling the judgment that is to come on various nations. God through Isaiah is exposing of the failure and future downfall of all rival kingdoms, so that the hope of God's people would be in God and not in any earthly kingdom.

There was a time when Assyria seemed invincible, but now Assyria is gone. There was a time when the power of the Roman Caesar seemed unconquerable, now Nero is a popular name for pit bulls. There was a time when Zeus seemed like a god above all other gods, now his name is the brand of my beard wash.

Assyria is gone, but God's word endures. God's promise endures. God gives his people hope that will not disappoint.

But let us not be like the people of Judah Isaiah's day who said, "No, I'm good. I don't have idols. Other people might, but I don't." The book of Psalms says, "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see...Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them"(Ps 115:4–5; 8). The scariest thing about idols is that they blind you to their very existence.

It is the mercy of God to bring us to conviction concerning our sin and our idols. To acknowledge and confront our sin is unpleasant, but it is a necessary step toward freedom. Conviction of sin is a gift of the Spirit.

As Pastor Ray Ortlund has said so well: *Conviction of sin is the violent sweetness of God opposing the sins lying comfortably undisturbed in our lives. Conviction of sin is the merciful God declaring war on the false peace we settle for. Conviction of sin is our escape from malaise to joy, from attending church to worship, from faking it to authenticity. Conviction of sin, with the forgiveness of Jesus pouring over our wounds, is life.*⁸

2.) God Confronts our Lack of Sincerity.

⁸ Ibid., 26.

God continues his confrontation in verse 10: *“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!”* (Isaiah 1:10, ESV).

God’s people are in such a state of immorality God calls them Sodom and Gomorrah, referring to infamously wicked cities that were destroyed by God’s judgment in the book of Genesis (Gen . 19).

This would have been outrageous and offensive to Isaiah’s audience. “How dare he say something like this to us! We attend worship gatherings at the Temple! We quote Bible verses!”

But Isaiah shows that God doesn’t care about outward displays of religiosity. In fact, God very aware that it is possible to practice external tokens devotion while having a heart cold to God and the things God cares about – and, hauntingly, it is possible to do this and not even know it.

The people of Judah are just going through the motions of religion. Sure, they are observing festivals and offering burnt sacrifices and incense. But they have no passion for God. They are not worshipping Him with their affections of their hearts or with the holiness of their lives. They may be fooling themselves, but they are not fooling God.

Of this half-hearted worship, God says: *“Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them”* (Isaiah 1:14, ESV).

God is saying, “Do I have to go to church today? Your worship is unendurable to me. You say you love me, but your indifference to your sin reveals what you really think of me.”⁹

And if you think, well this is just the angry God of the Old Testament; God is much more kind in the New Testament, just take a look what Jesus had to say about outward religiosity and inner hypocrisy: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness”* (Matthew 23:27–28, ESV).

In God’s mercy may we be called to worship the Lord in Spirit and in truth. May we worship more with our words and our attendance. But would we have hearts of service, hearts of generosity, and hearts for people, and hearts for the living God!

3.) God Confronts our Lack of Love.

Continuing with this theme of Isaiah comparing the people of Judah to Sodom, it is worthwhile understanding how the prophets understood the sin of Sodom. In other words, what was it about Sodom that earned them the famous judgment of fire and brimstone?

You might get the idea in Genesis that it was merely sexual immorality and sin, and I think that was certainly part of it. But the Bible shows there was something more happening. This is Ezekiel: *“Behold,*

⁹ Ortlund, 36.

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. They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it” (Ezekiel 16:49–50, ESV).

In other words, the sin of Sodom was widespread social injustice and lack of love for the poor.

Isaiah is picking up on this theme when he calls his people to a repentance wherein they are to display sacrificial love to their neighbor: *“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (Isaiah 1:16–17, ESV).*

Now it’s interesting, because this is now the second time I have taught this passage. The passage hasn’t changed, but our culture has. In today’s climate, I feel simply saying what Isaiah says is now a controversial and potentially polarizing issue. God calls us to love the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. It is not optional.

This needs to influence the way we see our call as Christians and the way we see our call as a church. And to emphasize acts of love in no way is to say we should have less gospel in our mission. Tangible love without clear truth and clear truth without tangible love both equally sub-biblical forms of Christian mission for the body of Christ.

This is why we support missions like the Refugee Language Project so that we can befriend refugees, teach refugees English, and share the gospel with them. This is why we support Crisis Aid who rescues women from the sex industry, houses them, trains them with hireable skills, and disciples them in the gospel. This is why we unapologetically stand for the right to life for unborn.

The oppressed still exist, and God’s people are called to stand in the gap.

III. The Savior – The One Who Confronts Our Sin & Makes Us White As Snow

God confronts his people to a call to repentance. But there is also a beautiful promise of redemption: *“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isaiah 1:18, ESV).*

As one commentator says: “‘Though your sins are like scarlet’ assumes that Judah’s sinfulness is an irrefutable fact; there is nothing to argue about. [But] God does not have an agenda to end the relationship with punishment.”¹⁰

God has confronted us to show the utter impossibility of any salvation in and of ourselves. God is showing us that in order to be saved we must step out of the way. It is God who will remove our sins and restore our righteousness. God intends to do what we could never do. And through Jesus, he has! Jesus is the Messiah who saved us when we could not save ourselves. He exchanged our punishment for his reward: *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might*

¹⁰ Smith, 109–110.

become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

God still save sinners. Our sin is great; our Savior is greater. AMEN .

Community Group Questions

- 1) *At the time of Isaiah’s ministry, the people of Judah were looking to alliances with foreign nations for salvation instead of God. Instead of being distinct from the world; they were compromising with the world. What are those things, or who are those people, that you depend on more than Jesus to provide the meaning and purpose and security and significance you long for?*
- 2) *Isaiah 1:11-15 exposes how easy it is to go through the motions of religious ritual with insincere hearts. How can we stoke a genuine love for God in our hearts?*
- 3) *In this Advent season, how might God be challenging you to connect to his mission in the earth? What are the opportunities available to you to do good, seek justice, and correct oppression (Isaiah 1:17)?*