

SERMON TITLE: "Come Let Us Reason Together"

TEXT: Isaiah 1

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We are beginning a new series of sermons today. In the past year we have looked at Genesis and at the Sermon on the Mount. As I reflected on what we should study next it occurred to me that one of the fascinating parts of the Bible that we have not studied for a while is the prophetic section.

In my own listening through the Bible I have recently gone through the Book of Isaiah and was once again struck by its power and beauty. It is a good study and so Ryan and I decided to do this as a series.

Why Isaiah?

1. It is Scripture and just because of that knowing it is important to God's people. This is a particularly big chunk of Scripture and one that Jesus and the NT writers referred to a great deal.

2. It is a book that speaks to a time that we can identify with. It was a time with all kinds of complexity and the rise and fall of different nations and kings.

Like all of life the story is set on 2 grids- time and space. First the grid of time-

The Book of Isaiah is one of those books that cover a great arc of the history of God's people but to understand it one does need to remember the even larger story. So I thought I'd give just a quick overview.

The story of God's work, of course begins in Genesis 1 with the creation of everything but there is a big beginning 2000 years before Christ as God meet Abraham. This marks the beginning of a way of dealing with people specifically. God had called Abram out from his city in the Ur of the Chaldees.

And now the grid of space- it was a journey across lands-

The story begins:

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. Genesis 11:31

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. Genesis 12:1-2

From there the story ends with Abraham descendents ending up in captivity in Egypt- then to settle in Canaan- then taking on King for themselves.

It is the story of God's offer and promise to Abraham and the confusing and conflicted response to that by Abraham and those who followed. There are a lot of ways to look at this story but one of the consistent images the Bible uses is that of a parent-pursuing their children. The parent of course is God and we are the children being pursued.

This picture of course, takes place with history as the backdrop- 1000s of years of history, in fact. When we did our study of Genesis the most dramatic view of history was on display.

But the Bible is very clear that the story of God and His people is not just a story of grand time frames- it is also the story of individual lives that unfold in minutes and hours and days. This is a story that is meant to be told and understood by people like you and me as we go through our joys and sorrows, and face our challenges and make our decisions right here and right now.

And that is one of the aspects of reading the prophets- they combine the ordinary challenges of this minute, this hour and this day with the very big picture in a unique, beautiful and inspiring way. Keep that in mind as we go through this book.

And so from the vast expanse of history Isaiah zeros in on a particular time and place and lifetime. And it is the book of a lifetime as Isaiah chronicles the reigns of 4 kings over a period of approximately 60 years and it is by giving the context of his day that Isaiah begins-

The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Isaiah 1:1

During that time period Isaiah had seen the best and the worst. Under Hezekiah and Uzziah the country was at its best- under Jotham and Ahaz it was at its worst- and yet God's people were there.

The general trajectory however did not look good. Almost everyone seemed to know that even then things were going quite well- something was seriously wrong.

There had been serious compromises to what God asked of His people- First- God's people had been split into 2 nations- the North and the South. They had split for a very simple reason- the same reason that people have split up since the beginning of time- they couldn't seem to get along. Rather than endlessly provoke each other it was better to split. It's hard to argue with that logic- but it misses the point that endlessly provoking each other and splitting up are not actually the only 2 options in life.

But the split had happened and by Isaiah's time the split was already 100s of years old and simply a fact of life.

Second- moral decay was just a given. There is a rule that the status quo is not stable. In morality and in health you are either getting better or worse. In health age has a big role to play and we need to come to terms with the fact that getting older means we can't do the things we used to do the same way.

But in morality we don't have to be getting worse- and yet most cultures have long periods of prolonged moral degeneration. That was the case during the time of Isaiah. The Northern Kingdom was the leader in moral decline and seemed to find new ways of doing the wrong thing with astonishing ease.

But you can't go down forever without hitting the bottom- and there is a bottom. The bottom comes when it's all over. During Isaiah's lifetime the Northern Kingdom went down for the last time. The Assyrians invaded, took them captive and deported and

scattered them such that they would never recover. 10 of the 12 tribes that God had taken out of Egypt disappeared- never to be found again.

And from the safety of his home in the South Isaiah saw that happen and was heart broken.

He was particularly heart broken because he watched his own nation careening down the same course- even while things looked pretty good for them.

And in fact they were pretty good, for the most part. There would be a few “recessions” and 2 of the 4 kings during Isaiah’s lifetime were really quite good.

But Isaiah knew that the downward slide had a terrifying momentum to it.

But Isaiah knew that this downward momentum was not a random irrational slide- it was a slide originating in a very specific place. God’s children were not listening to the parent calling out to them. And that is why even momentary reprieves did not make Isaiah leap for joy.

Our Times

As I thought about our times it occurred to me that there are a lot of parallels between our times and the times of Isaiah-

1. Most people are quite ready to acknowledge that things don’t look good, that there are serious storm clouds on the horizon.
2. The world can just feel like a very big, very complicated mess.
4. It is easy to get lost in the big picture. After all there are 6 billion people on earth. What difference can my little life possibly make in that big picture.

But it is to a people just like us that Isaiah delivered a message from God- let us listen to it by way of introduction today and then in the weeks ahead.

Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up . . . Isaiah 1:2

#1. God Loves His People/Children

That is the place where this book begins and ends and without this as a premise you can’t understand the Bible. The Bible does say things that are hard to understand and fit into what we think God should be like- but if you don’t understand that the story of the Bible is the story of God loving people- the confusion will be overwhelming and without recovery.

It has been the call of the crowd from the beginning- “Run with us- your parents only want to keep you from having fun. They punish you and try to contain you because they are malicious and mean spirited.”

How often has that charge been raised against God? “What kind of a God would demand that people obey Him- just because?”

It isn’t just because. Indeed there are parents- far too many whose mean spirited and controlling streaks do control their parenting- but God is not a malicious parent. He created us for a purpose and the boundaries and directions He asks us to live by are not arbitrary but driven by His desire for our very best. And God loves people just as parents are supposed to love their children.

God loves His people- all people.

Because of this what follows is actually beyond comprehension-

... but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Isaiah 1:2-3

#2. God's People Rebel

This is an observable fact- God's people did not listen to His directions. In spite on the fact the God reaches out to His people over and over again the history of humanity is that of walking away from God's direction.

There are different ideas about what makes up a human being. Are we basically good or evil or neutral? That discussion can and will probably go on until the end of time.

What isn't debatable is that as human beings we persistently find ways of generating evil. The world is full of horrors brought on by what people do to each other.

The question is why?

Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. Isaiah 1:5

And so Isaiah asks a question- partly rhetorical partly demanding an answer-

#3. Why Do People Choose Evil? Because It Feels Good

Every parent who has ever seen a child on the road to disaster knows how real this question is. The road to disaster is of course the easiest to see when the choices hit us in the face- when we see gangs of young people shooting each other and when the homeless people on the streets block our paths. But choosing evil does not start in those places- it starts far closer to where we live and play.

The answer to why we choose evil is very simple- it offers more rewards, immediately than doing good. This was the lesson from Aristotle that we learned on our California trip. We choose what gives is the most pleasure.

The problem with evil of course is simple- short-term gain for long term pain. Those who choose evil gain immediately- but they will pay.

And the answer is-

#4. People Do Choose Evil And They Do Pay The Price

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 oil.

Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.

The Daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege. Isaiah 1:7-8

It is a grim conclusion. There is no avoiding the price of evil. Some people avoid it for a long time. For some people fortune keeps them from paying the price immediately and others are clever at dodging the bullet.

The famous story of Bernie Madoff that broke over Christmas time the story of a man who through both good fortune and ingenuity was able to avoid paying the price for his choices. He was so good at it that had not a string of bad fortune intervened- he might even have avoided the calamity for his entire lifetime- but there is no doubt that at his house of card could not last- it was built on a premise of deceit and “evil.”

Given that we all are caught up in this mess- it could sound quite hopeless- but God did not send Isaiah or any other the other prophets simply with a message of doom. There would be no purpose to that.

No, there is hope, even in this miserable scenario-

Unless the LORD Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah. Isaiah 1:9

#5. God Has A Plan- Stop, Look And Listen

God gave Abraham and offer of blessings. It was to be the blessing of a relationship between God and His people. His people messed it up and God sends Isaiah with a message-

“Stop, Look and Listen”

Stop the course of calamity that you are on.

Look at the mess you are in.

And Listen- God has something to say-

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! Isaiah 1:10

And what does God say? The whole Book of Isaiah is what God says but He begins with 2 things

"The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?" says the LORD. “. . . Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Isaiah 1:11-13

And then-

Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. Isaiah 1:16-17

What’s the bottom line in all this? The answer is quite simple-

#6. Things Have To Change

Every parent has had this discussion with their children- “It’s not about promises- it’s about a change of behaviour.”

Put it another way- it’s not about religion- it’s about a changed life.

What is religion? In this context religion is like living by the law- it’s about making sure you jump through the hoops right and avoiding the penalties so that we finish the course as quickly as possible.

But that's not what a parent wants from their children- they don't want simply to have them do enough chores for an allowance and keep from tormenting their siblings long enough not to have penalties- so that they can get out of the house.

No a parent wants, happy, healthy children to love and be loved by. And this can't go to a good place with just empty words. There has to be action.

It is so simple. But if it is that simple why doesn't it happen?

And they comes one of the most beautiful short phrases in the Bible- a phrase that I believe gives us the foundation from which to study Isaiah.

"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. Isaiah 1:18

And that is the bottom line of the parent's heart. And what does the parent do- the parent takes the initiative- again and again to reopen the conversation with the child.

Things do need to change- we know that. The change is massive and fundamental- but the change begins with a conversation- God asking us to sit down and talk this out.