

Scriptures

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

This book contains the messages about Judah and Jerusalem which God revealed to Isaiah son of Amoz during the time when Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah were kings of Judah.

¹⁰ Jerusalem, your rulers and your people are like those of Sodom and Gomorrah. Listen to what the LORD is saying to you. Pay attention to what our God is teaching you. ¹¹ He says, "Do you think I want all these sacrifices you keep offering to me? I have had more than enough of the sheep you burn as sacrifices and of the fat of your fine animals. I am tired of the blood of bulls and sheep and goats. ¹² Who asked you to bring me all this when you come to worship me? Who asked you to do all this tramping around in my Temple? ¹³ It's useless to bring your offerings. I am disgusted with the smell of the incense you burn. I cannot stand your New Moon Festivals, your Sabbaths, and your religious gatherings; they are all corrupted by your sins. ¹⁴ I hate your New Moon Festivals and holy days; they are a burden that I am tired of bearing.

¹⁵ "When you lift your hands in prayer, I will not look at you. No matter how much you pray, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with blood. ¹⁶ Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil ¹⁷ and learn to do right. See that justice is done—help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows."

¹⁸ The LORD says, "Now, let's settle the matter. You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you as clean as snow. Although your stains are deep red, you will be as white as wool. ¹⁹ If you will only obey me, you will eat the good things the land produces. ²⁰ But if you defy me, you are doomed to die. I, the LORD, have spoken."

Psalms 50:1-8, 22-23

The Almighty God, the LORD, speaks;

he calls to the whole earth from east to west.

² God shines from Zion,
the city perfect in its beauty.

³ Our God is coming, but not in silence;
a raging fire is in front of him,
a furious storm around him.

⁴ He calls heaven and earth as witnesses
to see him judge his people.

⁵ He says, "Gather my faithful people to me,
those who made a covenant with me by offering a sacrifice."

⁶ The heavens proclaim that God is righteous,
that he himself is judge.

⁷ "Listen, my people, and I will speak;
I will testify against you, Israel.
I am God, your God.

⁸ I do not reprimand you because of your sacrifices
and the burnt offerings you always bring me.

Luke 12:32-40

Riches in Heaven

³² "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom. ³³ Sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor. Provide for yourselves purses that don't wear out, and save your riches in heaven, where they will never decrease, because no thief can get to them, and no moth can destroy them. ³⁴ For your heart will always be where your riches are.

Watchful Servants

³⁵ "Be ready for whatever comes, dressed for action and with your lamps lit, ³⁶ like servants who are waiting for their master to come back from a wedding feast. When he comes and knocks, they will open the door for him at once.

³⁷ How happy are those servants whose master finds them awake and ready when he returns! I tell you, he will take off his coat, have them sit down, and will wait on them. ³⁸ How happy they are if he finds them ready, even if he should come at midnight or even later! ³⁹ And you can be sure that if the owner of a house knew the time when the thief

would come, he would not let the thief break into his house.⁴⁰ And you, too, must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him.”

Sermon: Risky Faith

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

If you like to play it safe, to cover all your bases, dot your i's and cross your t's and generally keep yourself under control, then the readings this week will have been shocking to you – unthinkable even. They just sound plain old reckless:

Don't be afraid, despite all that we know.

God will give what is good, like an indulgent father, and will provide for us better than we know to ask.

Sell your possessions, give to the poor, and follow Jesus.

This is pretty challenging stuff. Much of the time as Christians we want to show up on Sundays, try not to drink or swear too much, pay our taxes and generally not be a bother to anyone. For many of us, Christianity is a little like an additional life insurance policy – it's what prudent people do. It's part of being an all-round good citizen.

But God isn't really looking for church people – the reading from Isaiah this morning makes that abundantly clear. God tears a strip off those people offering sacrifices, saying I am tired of the blood of bulls and sheep and goats. God is not interested in the people who come every Sabbath and on Holy Days but who don't know how to live a holy life.

No matter how much you pray, I will not listen, God says, for your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice is done—help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend the widows.

God is not looking for church-goers. We can have an angelic choir, beautiful stained glass, fancy communions with rich bread and the finest black cherry wine...once everyone is in and the door is safely locked. God rejected this kind of worship in the Isaiah reading. Vain offerings and lengthy prayers are just worthless rituals to God who really wants his people to cleanse their hearts and change of their ways; “stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice is done—help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend the widows.”

God doesn't call us to be well behaved church people. Jesus was not a well behaved man. As Lewis puts it in the Narnia series - He isn't a tame lion. Jesus didn't just go along to get along, He stood up when he encountered injustice. Being good is ok, but it rather misses the point. What God really wants are warriors, the world is crying out for justice and we have a role to play in setting things right. Chapter 3 of Genesis tells us that it was us who introduced sin into God's good creation, so therefor it's up to us to help ameliorate the effects of it.

I said to the kids about immaterial things that are real, things that are eternal, and it is very true. Kids are often not in a position to help materially or physically - they have something else to offer. But I want to tell you something different. As adults, as the stewards of creation, we have a special responsibility. It is good to pray for the poor, we need to do this, but praying for them is a poor substitute for giving them a sandwich, or better yet, a job with fair pay and decent benefits.

We want to store up treasures for ourselves in heaven, and often the way to do that is to part with some of our treasures here on earth.

One example of eternal and earthly treasures coming together is the D.C. MacDonald scholarship. In the next few weeks we will be meeting with the young lady who is the recipient this year – I'm quite looking forward to it.

Some of you might remember that I was awarded that scholarship in 2014. What you might not know is what was going on in my life at that time. Like most students I relied on OSAP to get me through – making the decision to leave a paying job and live on borrowed money is no easy decision, but it was where I felt God pulling me, so that's the road I took.

In the fall of 2014 I began my second year at Knox College in Toronto, and I got a letter from OSAP saying that they had given me too much money two years earlier when I was studying for my Bachelor of Theology, and that I would have to give them \$6000 right away or they would not release my student loans for that year. It was the first few weeks of school and I had been waiting for the student loans to come through so I could pay my tuition. Suddenly I found myself with no way to pay for school. Now, as you can imagine, a student who has to rely on OSAP to attend school does not have \$6000 lying around to send to OSAP – my line of credit was pretty much tapped out and with no money to pay OSAP and no money to pay for tuition I was looking at the very real possibility of dropping out. I was out of options.

Then along came the director of Academics at Knox to inform me that I was about to receive the DC MacDonald scholarship for - \$6000. I hadn't applied for the scholarship. I hadn't told anyone at school about my financial hardship. But there it was.

Now, there are two things to learn from this. First – while we may take an earthy action, such as giving away a scholarship, God will turn that action into a miracle. Though we may not be aware of it at the time, God directs and multiplies our actions – God takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary. This is what living in faith is all about. Our small steps become God's great strides.

The second observation is that you have to be careful who you help, because once you open the door some of us will never leave.

As believers we are called to action, but not everything will be a grand gesture. The banana was a tiny act to a tiny insignificant child, yet 30 years later that is still a treasured memory. Often our acts of faith will be small - wrapping a skinned knee, listening to someone reminisce.

But there will also be times when you are required to give far beyond what you are comfortable with. In the Hebrews reading this morning we were reminded of the faith of Abraham and Sarah who left lands and family to follow God's call. They became nomads, wanderers. You might remember that when Cain murdered Abel his sentence was to become a wanderer on earth. Later in Exodus we read that the Israelites had to spend 40 years wandering in the desert because of their disobedience. Wandering was a punishment, wandering was a curse.

The wanderer was a particularly vulnerable person – no lands to provide food or wealth, no possessions aside from what he could carry. In fact, usually in the old testament when we hear of God calling for justice he is calling for justice for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner or alien. These are the three classes of people who really needed protection in biblical times – things are much the same today.

The point is, Abraham's walk of faith was incredibly hard. He had Sarah by his side and his flocks, but that was it. At that point he didn't even have any sons to take with him. And he was already old. Abraham and Sarah invite us to be risk takers, willing to follow God even when the circumstances seem overwhelming.

If Abraham and Sarah's situation seems extreme we should consider the real human, the one who is our example in all things – Jesus of Nazareth. In following God's command to do justice and stand up for the weak and disadvantaged Jesus gave up everything.

Abraham gave up land and family, but Jesus

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Jesus, Lord of Creation, gave it all away in the name of justice, for the cause of helping those less powerful than himself. This truly is a life of faith. It is only through faith that we can even hope to act in the manner that Jesus himself would.

It is the power of God in us that enables such faith. It's curious that we use our worldly influence and wealth to seek justice, but it is only through God's power that we can do such a thing in the first place.

By qualifying "flock" with "little," Jesus is saying something about the unassuming nature of his disciples, who might be little in number, little in power, little in social standing or some combination of all of them. Jesus says, however, that the "little flock" should not fear because "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." The unassuming, insignificant flock, who elsewhere in the Gospels are called little ones or even infants, cannot rely on their power, strength or wealth to create a kingdom but must depend only on their faith in God.

Jesus said 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom.' The little flock are the disciples – they are few in number, they have little wealth, they have no social status. This little flock can't rely on their own power or strength or wealth to create a Kingdom; they must depend only on their faith in God.

This is an important lesson for modern congregations – we are often concerned with the size of the congregation or the size of the building. We confuse worldly ideas of success with faithfulness – but congregations are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful. The measure of a church is not its size, or its splendour, but its faith, and our faith is measured in how we 'learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, and plead for the widow.'

Faith is following Jesus by attending to all the "little" things that seem unimportant or insignificant, as well as paying attention to all the "little" people we are tempted to forget or overlook. The faith of the "little flock" is a rejection of any sense of entitlement about what we deserve or have earned, replaced by the experience of God's grace and mercy for those who trust in Him and follow Him.

This faith manifests itself in a way of life that leads to a proper relationship to earthly possessions, which Jesus encourages his "little flock" to sell in order to give alms to those in need. A proper relationship to things reflects that one's hopes are not just earthly but heavenly, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Yet detachment from possessions, especially seen in giving alms and other acts of generosity, transforms us by creating greater attachment to God and other people.

Faith is not something we have to have 'enough of' in order to do things, or change things, or to be who we are called to be. It is not some sort of magic potion. Instead, it is the quiet, firm conviction that in spite of whatever evidence our current reality tries to throw at us ... that there is a God, that God is loving and good, and that loving and good God is both our beginning foundation and our ultimate end.

Amen.