

Divine Generosity

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 & Luke 12:32-40

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost/ 7th August 2022

Isaiah throws us into court. A trial is underway. In the dock is Israel, the people of God. An entire nation is on trial. God is both prosecuting attorney and judge. And the prophet Isaiah is a witness for the prosecution. This is his testimony. Their crime? Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann put it this way: “*Stupidity.*” They are guilty of “*Willful stupidity.*”¹

You’re probably thinking, it’s not a sin or crime to be stupid. (Maybe it should be.) It’s not one of the Ten Commandments. So, what did Israel do that’s so stupid and worthy of God’s judgment? “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” What don’t they know? That they belong to God. The ox and the donkey at least know to whom they belong. Israel has turned away from God. As Brueggemann said, turning away from God is just plain stupid. It’s not very wise.

Aloof and far from God, Israel is suffering. The nation is full of iniquity, evil, and corruption, both young and old. Desolation surrounds them. The body politic is sick. From head to toe, the wounds are deep; sores are bleeding and festering. There’s no soundness, no health, no wholeness in the people. Driving the point home, Isaiah says Jerusalem, the city of Yahweh’s peace, is no better than the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah—an unimaginable, shocking comparison—cities destroyed because of their faithlessness. There’s no one left who truly welcomes God’s sovereignty, no one who truly worships Yahweh.

Like Sodom and Gomorrah, Jerusalem’s faith and worship life had become a joke. And Isaiah knows the source of trouble: he blames the temple in Jerusalem. And he doesn’t hold back against the temple, meaning the temple’s priestly activity along with the people’s empty religiosity. It’s become a charade, a joke, and an insult to Yahweh. “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? ...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” (Isaiah 1:11). Yahweh effectively says, “Don’t bother coming to my sanctuaries anymore” (Is. 1:12). “[B]ringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me” (Is. 1:13). Your feast days and rituals and festivals and liturgies “have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them” (Is. 1:14). They’re tiresome. And your prayers—your prayers are hollow because there’s blood on your hands (Is. 1:15). You think you worship me, God says, but my people suffer and die because *you* refuse to help.

Remember, God authorized the building of the temple, required the sacrifices of rams, bulls, lambs, and goats, sanctioned the festivals and liturgies for the Sabbath, and welcomed prayers. God now wants nothing to do with them and doesn’t welcome them. *Because their religion had become toxic*, their liturgies, pieties, and priestly functions have failed them. Their worship failed to lead them into a deeper relationship with God. Sabbath after Sabbath, they went through the rituals but failed to help their neighbors and ease their burdens. Their worship was false, their offerings dishonest, because their worship did not lead to stronger connections to

God. How do we know that? *Because one's relationship with God yields a life whose actions are congruent with who God is and what God desires for all God's people.* This is why idolatry is a grave sin because you become what you worship. Jesus said, "By their fruit you shall know them" (Matthew 7:16).

Yahweh now rejects Israel. *You're on your own now. There's the door.* God is angry in this text, full of rage toward Israel. And before we get comfortable in Christian self-righteousness, remember that the early Church saw itself as an extension of Israel. The Church is an ever-expanding community called the people of God. The indictments leveled against Israel can easily be leveled against the Church at any time in its history, including the present time, for precisely the same reasons Isaiah is furious with Israel: for the stupidity, the willful stupidity of the Church that tries to go it alone, that forgets its dependence upon God, that forgets that the Church doesn't belong to itself but to God, when its pieties, liturgies, and offerings are dishonest and empty, and worship fails to connect us with God, when worship fails to have a tangible effect upon the way we live, no bearing upon the way we care for God's people, care for our neighbors, easing their burdens. I can imagine God sometimes saying to the Church, "You're on your own, I'm outta here".

Yes, there is a lot of judgment in this text—for good reasons. Sure, the world is spectacularly beautiful, and people can be amazing, but look at the mess we've made and are making. Just look at the challenges facing the Church today—with its idolatrous obsession with self-preservation at the expense of living the gospel. Sure, it's easy to get depressed. This is a burdensome message—and we're only looking at ten verses in the first chapter of Isaiah; keep reading! Isaiah is relentless. No one ever welcomes the voice of the prophet. And the Church is often uneasy with prophetic preaching because no one comes out looking or feeling good. In thirty-five years of preaching, no one has ever said, "Ken, give us more prophetic sermons, please." Israel has a long history of killing the prophets, as does the Church. Who wants to hear all this judgment?

We probably don't want to hear this because, deep down, we know we deserve it. We know we're guilty. That guilt informs the way we hear scripture, even verses like these. Guilt shapes our images of God as essentially an angry *judge*. I wonder if we're pulled toward the image of God as judge because we know, deep down, we're guilty or think we should feel guilty about something. Unfortunately, our guilt hinders us from hearing and seeing the other things happening here.

Theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) insisted that we must hold judgment and mercy in tension. In our society, we tend to want to separate them, either judgment or mercy. However, Barth observed that judgment *and* mercy are the opposite sides of the same coin, as it were. There's judgment in God, *but God's judgment and anger are never an end in themselves, as they are for many human beings.* (This can't be stressed enough!) The intent of God's judgment is *not* to destroy or annihilate. If we have discovered in Christ that "God is love" (1 John 4:16b), we need to ask: *what does judgment from a loving God look like?* God's judgment is upon the things that hinder God's will for creation and hamper human flourishing. It is a judgment that judges *sin* (not people) to clear away everything that impedes God's desire for the world. God's ultimate desire is *to redeem, restore, heal, and make whole.* God's judgment leads the way

toward *restorative* justice. Yes, there's plenty of judgment here, but judgment is never the last word. The final word is mercy.

And that mercy, that grace, arrives as a kind of whiplash. It's never what we expect; it catches us off-guard and surprised. It breaks in and undoes what we expect. It breaks the cycle of violence and death. We expect God's judgment to keep coming. And then the *great reversal* comes: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the orphan. ...Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (Is. 1:16-17, 18b). You see, *that's* what God wants for all God's people. Not judgment, but mercy. That's what God wants to give and is giving God's people when we remain close to God, for we belong not to ourselves but God.

The lectionary for today links the Isaiah text with Luke 12. As we've seen over the summer, the kingdom or realm of God is not "up there" in heaven but here and now and is on the way. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). *Good pleasure*. And the coming of the kingdom of God means we can trust God's providential care over the earth.

So, Jesus says, we need to "be dressed for action." Be ready for vigorous activity. For the reign of God has come and is on the way. The master is coming, and something remarkable and unexpected will happen when he arrives. Be on your guard, or else you'll miss it, for it will shock and surprise you. "[*T*ruly I tell you," Jesus says, "[*the master*] will fasten his belt and have his servants sit down to eat [at this table], and he will come and serve them." The servant will become the master. The master comes to serve. The master invites the servant to sit down. He serves the servant. In the reign of God, roles are reversed. It's about reversal. "The first will discover they are last and the last will be given the place of honor. The mighty come down, and the lowly find themselves exalted. The rich go hungry, while the poor are filled with delight. Priests and temple functionaries pass by victims, while hated Samaritans demonstrate the meaning of faithfulness [and grace]. Sinners attain justification, while the prayers of the righteous rebound against the floors of heaven (Luke 18:11-14)."²

Luke's entire gospel, from beginning to end, establishes a larger context of God's kingdom, and the kingdom is an extension of God's good pleasure. That's what Jesus wants his people to know, to claim for their lives, and then from that knowledge, Jesus wants us to go out and preach the realm of God, serve the realm of God, live the realm of God, receive the realm of God, and discover the realm of God in unlikely places. This becomes the foundation for Christian discipleship, for the Christian life. Greg Carey, a New Testament scholar at Lancaster Theological Seminary, is right when he says, "Discipleship emerges not from fearsome demands but from the outpouring of God's love. Divine generosity sets the tone for all of God's expectations."

It's the same divine generosity pouring through the prophetic judgments of Isaiah because he, too, knows that God is merciful and faithful and seeks our welfare. Isaiah, too, knows God's expectations for us. Isaiah, too, envisioned the reign of God. Our awareness of God's generosity shapes who we are as a people, and then it informs how we live—today—in

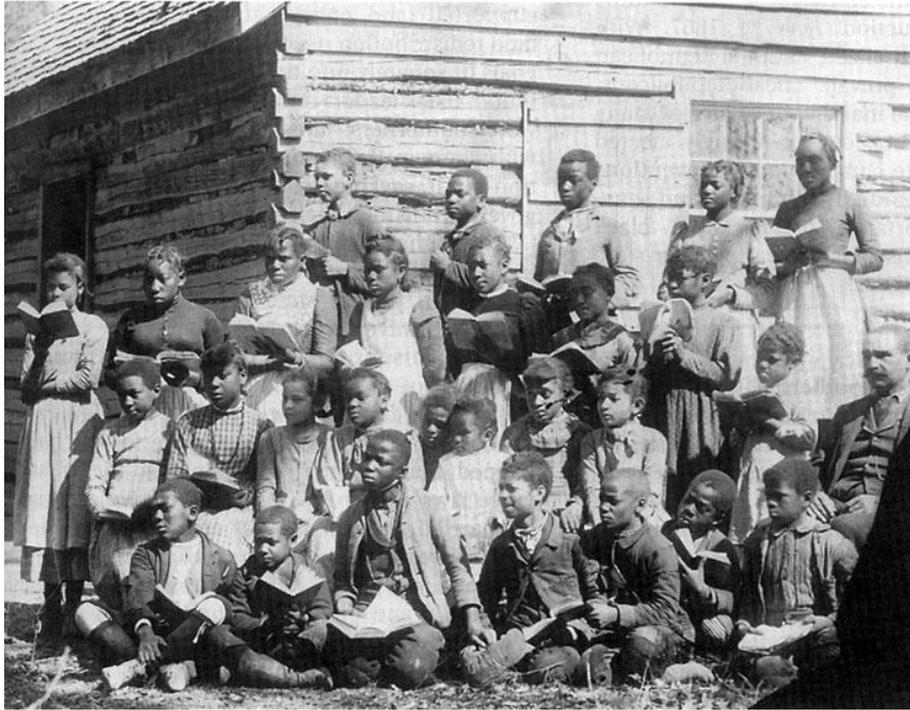
the body politic, out in the community. We discover God's generosity in our relationship with God, in our worship, in prayer, and in community, and discovering this again and again and again, we act.

For Isaiah (and for Jesus), right worship leads to right neighbor practices, which is how the Bible defines social justice. This is what the Bible means by righteousness.³ A change in relationships. For right worship will lead us away from evil toward the good. Right worship will lead you into the cause of God's justice. It's nothing additional you have to do. Stay close to the presence of God, stay engaged in the worship of God, and you find yourself thrown into those places of God's justice. Right worship spills over into social relationships and personal relationships and the responsibilities that come with them. In the worship of God, you and I discover that we must rescue the oppressed, that we have a responsibility for the orphan and the widow, meaning the most vulnerable in our community, the ones without an advocate or friend, those subject to political exclusion and economic exploitation. I'm still amazed when I hear people in the church say that we shouldn't be involved in social justice. And I have to say, what Bible are you reading? Why can you not see? What prevents you from seeing? What prevents you from hearing? What prevents you from doing it?

Yesterday, our Dismantling Racism Committee hosted a trip to the National African-American Museum of History and Culture in DC. Members and friends from CPC, Grace AME, and Christian Temple, 53 on the bus. If you haven't been, you need to go. Take some time. Mark and I spent most of the day in the special exhibit on Reconstruction: Make Good the Promises. It's an incredible exhibition, only there through August 21. And I would like to spotlight CPC member and ruling elder Mark Kennedy, who worked on this exhibit and encouraged us to see it before it leaves. Walking through the museum and special exhibit, it's easy to see that the long history of slavery in America is an example of worship gone bad. Think about it: how did churches endorse, support, and justify such an evil dehumanizing system like slavery for so long, for three hundred years? The Church has so much sin to confess. And even after the Civil War, after the end of slavery, Reconstruction could have made an enormous positive difference in the history of his nation county; we would not be where we are today if Reconstruction had been allowed to succeed. Instead, after the Civil War, through Reconstruction, throughout the 1900s, through Jim Crow, the Lynching Season, and beyond, many churches stood in the way of justice—they knew they were doing it. It was a conscious choice. It wasn't like, "Oh, we didn't know what we were doing." It was a deliberate choice. And there are still churches that stand in the way today.

But there were also churches, the minority, people and denominations that made the connection between worship and justice, who worked to restore and help heal the lives of formerly enslaved black people. These church people didn't head south after the war to build churches. What impressed me the most was that they sent people to the south to help formerly enslaved people learn to read. They set up schools. They taught them how to read so they could read the names at the voting booths to know whom to vote for. They taught them to read to improve their lives, to open up a world. And these schools—this almost gives me chills—these schools were set up in churches.⁴

If worship doesn't make us ready for action, to follow where Jesus leads, leading us into the kingdom that is both here and on the way, knowing that it is God's good pleasure to give the kingdom, then our faith is a charade. For it is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. We are called to action to serve the one who came not to be served but to serve. *May it be so.*



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¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 13.

² Greg Carey, "The Social Shape of Divine Generosity (Luke 12:32-40).

<http://www.odysseynetworks.org/news/2013/08/02/the-social-shape-of-divine-generosity-luke-1232-40>.

³ Brueggemann, 19.

⁴ If you can't make it to DC for this special exhibit, I recommend the companion volume by Kinshasha Holman Conwill and Paul Gardullo, eds. *Making Good the Promises: Reclaiming Reconstruction and Its Legacies*. Preface by Eric Foner (HarperCollins, 2021). The title is drawn from Frederick Douglass' question in a speech given at the Republican National Convention, in 1876: "The question now is, Do you mean to make good to us the promises in your constitution?"