

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Luke 12:32-40; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 is the moving beginning of the book of Isaiah. The opening words seem innocent enough: “The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1). But the vision then presented is profound indeed.

“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 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 asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moons and Sabbath and calling of convocation – I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them” (1:11-14).

This vision is directed both to the rulers and people of the southern kingdom of Judah (1:10). Isaiah is prophesying against both Israel’s powers – religious, political and economic – and against the people who “ape” those powers in their embrace of the powers’ priorities, standards and intentions for society and for life. And what are those standards?

What this prophecy of Isaiah’s is about is the definition of true religion. For those in power and for those who follow those in power, religion is about correct liturgy, ritual and theology. It is about burnt offerings, incense, proper ritual and solemn assemblies. It is by such acts that those in power think that they are accommodating God. And the reason for embracing such ceremony is that such observance seems to fulfill the expectations the people would require (and perhaps the systems themselves) to feel that they are acting in conformity with God’s wishes for their society while, at the same time, leaving them free to act as unjustly, greedily and as dominating as they wish to be. Such ritual seems to give Godly endorsement to the systems’ unjust practices.

But such is not God’s definition of true religion at all. God states through Isaiah, “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 widow” (1:16-17).

True religion for God is not proper ceremony, ritual and liturgy. It is right living. It is acting justly, seeking the good of all humanity, defending the weak and marginalized, and working to bring liberation and empowerment to everyone in your society. True religion is not orthodoxy; it is orthopraxy – just actions rather than correct ceremony. With such an assertion, Isaiah is declaring himself at one with other contemporary prophets who interpreted the Mosaic covenant as calling for social reform, not religious ritual (e.g., Amos 4:4-5; 5:21-24; 8:4-8; Micah 6:1-8).

What this entire account is really about is the attempted domestication of God by the principalities and powers of the land. The God of Israel’s basic doctrinal confession – the Mosaic covenant – as well as the God of Moses, Joshua, the judges and of its prophets was a

God who loved justice and hated ritual. Yahweh was a God who was always “letting his people go” – who was always setting them free from the lust for power, the greed for wealth and the ravenous hunger to dominate and control that shaped all political, economic and religious systems – whether Egyptian, Babylonian or Hebrew! But those who ruled the systems that organized the life of the nation – whether political or economic or religious – feared what would occur if the people were ever to take seriously the message and actions of such a god. And so, they sought to domesticate God; they sought to corral and break him so that he could no longer run free among the people. And the way they sought to domesticate God was not to publicly oppose God, for such opposition and persecution would only earn them the enmity and opposition of the people. Rather, what they would seek to do was to divert the people’s attention by both substituting a liturgical worship of God for a just obedience of God, and by fully participating in and observing these rituals (thus, endorsing them). In this way, the powers would put themselves forward as faithful followers of Yahweh while undermining the justice emphasis of Hebrew worship that underlay Hebrew faith. Thus, they would have successfully domesticated God.

But God is not to be domesticated. Isaiah concludes, speaking for God, “Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord; though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (vss. 18-20).

By “arguing it out”, Isaiah does not mean that God will give an objective hearing to the powers of Israel so that they might present their case for the legitimacy of liturgical worship. God has already stated what are God’s priorities of authentic religious practice (“seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow”). That issue is not open for debate.

What is opened for discussion is whether the systems and the people who follow them will respond to God’s demand and repent of their sin! This is what, in the theory of community and broad-based organizing, is called turning a problem into an issue. God is doing an action on the leaders of Israel and thus placing a demand upon them. “Choose you this day” – God’s way or the highway! God is not One with whom to trifle – or to debate. Will you repent of your actions and begin practicing a faith that is oriented around doing justice, loving the afflicted of society and humbly walking with God (Micah 6:8)? Will you be obedient – and thus, “eat the good of the land”? Or will you “refuse and rebel”? If you insist on continuing to give your political, economic and religious systems over to control, power and greed that create victims in its wake, then “you shall be devoured by the sword”. The fate of the nation and your fate are now in your hands! What, powers of Judah, will you choose?

Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23 deals with money and both its right and wrong uses. It does so by stating most dramatically why it is wrong for us to think of ourselves as the owner of land or anything else.

“God calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: “Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!” The heavens declare his

righteousness, for God himself is judge. “Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?” Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (50:4-15).

Why is it that humans cannot own anything? It is simply because God, as the creator of the world, is also its owner. God will not accept our burnt or slaughtered offerings because the sacrifice of life is not ours to give. God gives life, and only God can take it away. “Every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle (or domesticated animals) on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine” (50:10-11).

What God wants out of us, therefore, is not the sacrifice of another’s life, but obedience and gratitude. He wants “a sacrifice of thanksgiving”. And authentic thanksgiving can only be demonstrated through “thanksgiving”! We are to live out our gratitude. That is true sacrifice. That is true worship. “Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God” (50:23).

And what is thanksgiving and thanksgiving? The psalmist presents that by stating its negative. In other words, to not live lives of gratitude is demonstrated this way:-

“You hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. You make friends with a thief when you see one, and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your kin; you slander your own mother’s child” (50:17-20).

In other words, thanksgiving is not simply speaking words of thanks, singing hymns of laud or having a heart full of gratitude. That is not enough. Rather, true thanksgiving is living uprightly and responsibly, committed to acting both with justice and with compassionate, grace-filled love toward all those around you. This is the worship that God wants from us, and the kind of life we are to live out in our daily existence.

Luke 12:32-40 is a portion of a lengthy address given by Jesus that occupies the entirety of Luke’s twelfth chapter. Although the discourse deals with a number of topics, they are woven together by the theme of vigilance in the face of confrontation and action brought by the powers (or by the inevitable results of the acting-out of the policies and decisions of the powers). In the previous chapter, Jesus reminds his followers of the hostile treatment received by God’s messengers and given by the powers down through the centuries; it is no less reasonable to expect the same treatment now, and by Israel’s political, economic and religious leadership – for they always oppose any work that brings liberation or transformation to the people that will be viewed as being threatening to the powers’ domination.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus tells his followers, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (12:32-34).

Neither the powerful nor the ordinary people who are seduced by and "ape" the practices of the powerful (the "fool" in vs. 20) take any account of God's intentions for the world. They are not interested in contributing in any way to the coming of God's kingdom, for they wish only to build their own kingdom of wealth, power and domination. Therefore, both God's kingdom and the achievement of their desire will be denied them. But it is not so for those who authentically follow Jesus. If one lives his life motivated by the dream of God's intentions for the world and seeks to faithfully make it so in his/her own life and in the world around one, then "it (will be) your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom".

The unquestioning sign that one is receiving God's kingdom and is entering into God's shalom community is one's attitude toward one's money. One will "sell your possessions, and give alms" and living by values that build up humanity, rather than living by greed and lust for power. When one lives with open hands (particularly toward the poor) rather than grasping fists, then one has made "purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven". It is one's attitude toward and use of money that is the greatest indicator of one's true commitment either to God or to mammon, for "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also".

Jesus then moves in his discourse to deal with the necessity to be vigilant and ready for action. In this section, he stresses the certainty of his return and, consequently, the eventual triumph of the world as God intended it to be rather than the way it actually is under the political, economic and religious powers of domination. But he also stresses the uncertainty of the timing of his return, for God's kingdom may come to pass "during the middle of the night, or near dawn". What God requires out of his people is that "the master find (them) alert (when) he comes". And alert means not only being awake, but engaged in the work to which they have been called – working for Christ and His Kingdom in public life!

If Jesus' followers have been faithful in carrying out the mission to which they have been called, then Jesus "will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve him" (vs. 37). How these words must have stunned Jesus' listeners. The example Jesus is giving would be known to all his hearers, but his application of that example would have been astounding and even shocking.

In the Roman and wealthy Israelite household, when the master would return home from his day's activities, his servant would have "fastened his belt" (that is, he would have lifted and tied his robe with his belt above his knees in order to give him free movement and thus not hinder his service of the master), "had (the master) sit down to eat, come and serve him". But, instead, Jesus pointedly states that when he returns to earth, it will be Jesus who will play the role of servant and will serve his followers. In his very action at his return, Jesus displays the nature of his "Upside Down Kingdom" witnessed to in Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55). For Jesus, the very Son of God, will serve his servants who have so faithfully resisted the temptations of the systems but instead have given their all to work for justice, equitable distribution of wealth, the

elimination of poverty, and the bringing of all people into the most dynamic relationship with God and each other. “So you also must be ready (by doing this work of the kingdom), for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (vs. 40)!

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 opens with one of the most definitive statements about faith that appear in the scriptures. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith, our ancestors received approval” (vss. 1-2).

This statement on faith is beautiful, even striking. But even though it is almost pure poetry, it is hard to understand in English. However, in its original Greek, it is much clearer. The word “assurance” (Greek *hypostasis*) can also be translated “gives substance to”. And the word translated “conviction” (Gk. *elenchus*) is better translated “a proving of”. Thus, the writer is defining faith as the act on our parts that gives substance to our beliefs, the taking of a leap out into the dark believing that God will meet, embrace and use us there. Our faith-ancestors bore witness to (the meaning of the Greek translated “received approval”) the reality of a faithful God working in us to make us faithful. Like them (and their testimony), we discover that our faith also comes to us through our embrace of God against all logic and rationale, against all the evidence that the world and its systems dominate, are greedy and are power-hungry

“By faith”, Hebrews continues, “we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (v. 3). None of us were present at the “Big Bang” or even at the creation of the world. But Scripture attests to the world being brought into existence by God through His Word (Ps. 33:6, 9). Even the use of the word here translated “Word” (Gk. “*rhema*”, not “*logos*”) has more the active sense of “wind” or “breath” about it – it is the “God-breathed Word”. Thus, faith is like the creation of the world by the out-breathing of God – it is produced by something that cannot be seen but still impacts, and the evidence of that impact is seen in the results.

Thus, what the author is developing is the idea of faith being active and engaged in life. It is not something static, but active. Thus, the word “faith” is not a synonym for “belief” or the holding of a body of doctrine, but has more in common with the words “trust” and “hope”. That is, faith is not theology as much as it is an active response to the work God is doing in our lives and in society. It is not so much believing, as it is doing – even when there is no direct evidence of it at work (you can’t see, hear, touch or feel faith).

The writer of Hebrews now moves to an examination of this lively, dynamic, “God-breathed” faith by examining the faith of Israel’s ancestors. There is, in the entire chapter, eighteen segments that examine the faith of specific people of old. Our Epistle Lesson for today has three such references (vss. 8, 9, 11), all referring to Abraham, the progenitor of Israel.

“*By faith*, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. *By faith* he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. *By faith*, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had

promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore” (vv. 8-9, 11-12).

The depth of Abraham’s seemingly blind trust in God was exhibited in three ways, the author of Hebrews suggests. First, he obeyed God’s voice and left his homeland of Ur (near Babylon) for no destination at all except where God might lead him (Gen. 12:1-8). Second, he lived as a stranger and as an alien in a land that did not belong to him, believing that this was the land that God had given to him (Gen. 12:4-8; 15:7-20; 23:1-20). Third, Abraham trusted in God to give him a legitimate heir (after some misguided alternatives), even though he was past the age to sire children and Sarah his wife was past the age to conceive (Gen. 17:15-21; 18:9-15; 21:1-7). To Abraham, indeed, faith was “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”.

The author of Hebrews then reflects upon the descendants that came forth from Abraham and Sarah, “as many as the stars of heaven”, and writes of them, “All of these died in faith without having received the promises; but from a distance they saw and greeted them” (v. 13). Everything that all these people of old accomplished (and the author of Hebrews will shortly name who they were and what they did – vss. 17-40), they did without ever experiencing in their life times the eventual outcome of their faith. And that toward which all of them were straining without ever arriving was “a homeland, a better country, a heavenly one – the city that has foundations whose architect and builder is God” (vss. 14, 16, 10). In other words, what all these Israelite ancestors were striving for and believing in – but which they never reached – was the New Jerusalem, Jesus’ Kingdom of God, the World As God Intended It to Be, a community of shalom in which both people and the Powers (both temporal and spiritual) live in harmony with one another and in loving relationship with God, where only justice and wealth is shared, and therefore is a community where no one lives in poverty or in powerlessness! This, the author of Hebrews concludes, is for the believer (whether Abraham or us) the culmination and fulfillment of our active, dynamic faith – a faith that up to this moment is “the assurance of things hoped for, the convictions of things not seen”!

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