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Paul Purdue preaching

Across 66 chapters, Isaiah paints powerful prophetic word pictures. One of those images in verse 8 helps set the setting for the state of the nation: "*And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field,like a besieged city."*

Imagine Solomen's Temple and David's Palace, the intricate stone work, gold and silver fixtures, stunning gardens, fountains, porticos: one of the wonders of the ancient world; testaments to national power. That was the city the readers once knew. Isaiah describes Jerusalem as a vast bulldozed field planted with cucumbers. The vines creeping over the ruins. The only building left standing is a thrown together harvesting shack, four open, a place to get out of the sun as you process the cucumber harvest.

Isaiah is a political book. Exodus, Judges, Samuel, **Kings**, Chronicles, and the prophets are all political books. We have such a privatized faith and such individualistic conceptions of God's concerns, that we may misunderstand much of Isaiah's message

Listen to Isaiah's opening line. "*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.* It could read "the vision of the prophet concerning the United States during the terms of Bush, Obama, Biden, and Trump." The message is not just to individual citizens, but to the rulers, the courts, the markets: God speaks the entire economic system.

Isaiah is not happy with the way things are.
Woe, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who act corruptly

We Americans are so individualist, so focused on private faith and personal wealth. God cares about all God's creation. God is focused on the nation's sin, systemic injustice, and market-driven oppression.

Woe, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.

God is angry about political corruption, buying legislation, and ancient income inequality. Why does their once glorious capital complex look like a cucumber field? Isaiah says your rulers are corrupt, they hang out with thieves, they love bribes, they chase after gifts! Some people imagine God as the actor in the destruction of Israel in 587 BCE, others blame Babylon, but Isaiah names political corruption. Indeed, some scholars describe our passage as God's opening argument in the prosecution of the nation!

Do you think God is troubled that we will spend more than 10 billion in mid-term advertising? Do you think that God cares that Elon Musk, who has one vote, has spent 276 million dollars to elect his people? Do you think God cares that for many years and presidents a stream of billionaires parades througth the oval office?

What else does Isaiah charge the nation with? What concerns our prophetic prosecutor?

Is God mad that people are not going to church enough?

Isaiah tells us God is tired of church attendance without systemic reform and repentance: "*Who told you to do all this… I have stopped listening to your prayers, I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity."* God is fed up with people who worship but whose faith makes no difference in how they treat their neighbors.

Is God mad that kings Uzziah and Hezekiak have not required the ten commandments in every classroom? Is there too much inclusion and tolerance at the Temple? Isaiah, does not mention that.

Beyond political corruption, God is angry about some other things…
Woe, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
you rulers of Sodom!
(A city notorious for its mistreatment of strangers and immigrants)
Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them

They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them

Scholars tell us that: *"Doing justice would be a basic requirement that any god would have for any people. … (Justice and protection of the vulnerable) are considered the responsibilities that any civilized society would have. Establishing justice and defending the vulnerable are the hallmarks of a successful king. … Foundationally people believed that justice was built into the fabric of the cosmos and its laws were under the guardianship of the gods. The difference in the Israelite worldview was that in their belief, justice was built into the very character of God… (and they had) the spiritual obligation to be Godlike."* (The IVP Bible Background Commentary) Maybe we moderns have not made as much progress as we think?

The Hebrew legal code is hardly perfect but (amid some things we interrupt differently) it offers economic protections to vulnerable people. It remembers the plight of widows, orphans and the poor:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan… I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn… If you lend money to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor…. God loves the stranger. You shall also love the stranger! You shall not deprive an alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's

garment in pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. When you reap your harvest in your field and miss a row, you shall not go back to get it; you shall leave it for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. I am commanding you to do this. You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborer (Exodus 22 Deuteronomy 10: & 24)

Bishop Tom Bickerton in his New York Annual Conference newsletter laid out a lament of the state of our nation, shared "t*he God we imagine defines how we see the people around us. The way we imagine God determines how we treat the immigrant, the poor, and the marginalized.* (www.nyac.com/message-from-bishop-bickerton)

Much of the USA church has lost sight of a God whose very character is justice and protection of the vulnerable. The Bible understands justice as care for the marginalized and it is to be the foundational value of any nation.

So what do we do? Isaiah calls us to wash up. But the bath may be irritating as showering with lye soap. We made lye soap every fall behind the smoke house until I was 12. . My mom would say, "it will get rid of poison ivy". My dad said it worked "it gets rid of your skin".

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
cease to do evil;
learn to do good;
seek justice;
rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan;
plead for the widow.

Economic reform is painful because we want to shake every olive out of our trees on our farm. The market-gods tell us to harvest to the very edges of our spreadsheets. However, God calls into a more just and equitable way that cares about systemic justice.

God is not a privatized God.
Our faith is not an individual experience but rooted in loving God and loving neighbor.

God's goal is for every person in every city everywhere to prosper.

Today let us begin by remembering: God's character is Justice and Care for the vulnerable.

What if we stopped shaking every olive from the tree?

What if we lived with a deep longing that everyone would prosper?

Amend the warnings and the woes, Isaiah sees a new day coming- a day that emerges as the people begin to remember who God is- that God's character is justice and protection for the vulnerable. That day can begin inside of each of our hearts, souls and minds even as we work to reform the nations.

Here Isaiah's promise that one day.

And We shall be called the city of righteousness,
    the faithful city.
The Nation will be redeemed by justice,
    and those in her who repent, by righteousness.
Let us begin working and rooting for everyone,
So that we might recapture the image of God within us,
And that our deeds prove us righteous. amen