

The Law, the Word of the LORD, and How the World Changes

Isaiah 2:1-5; 55:6-11

Both our Call to Worship and the passage I just read to you were written by a man named Isaiah who lived some 700 years before Christ. Isaiah lived during a period of time when God's people were on the edge of being overrun by the Assyrians, who arose out of a city named Nineveh and who sent huge armies on horseback and chariot through Lebanon and Israel on their way to conquer Egypt as far south as the Ethiopian border. So through much of his sixty chapter book, Isaiah sang about how awful it was, at one point describing the Holy City as something like a plywood hut in a windstorm, rattling in the wind and rain, just like Jerusalem trembled and rattled as Assyrian horse troops and charioteers rode circles around their wall.

It was a tough time to be a believer in the Holy Land, but God inspired Isaiah to look for and sing about a future that wasn't about the bad guys riding down God's people with swords, a future that wasn't about sin and foolhardiness and hatred and lies. During those dark, dark, times, the Spirit gave Isaiah dreams and showed Isaiah visions that foresaw Christ, shining like a light in Galilee, the Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Jesus in human flesh, dying for our sins, rising from the dead, shining light on every far corner of the planet where men and women struggle for hope.

He saw a future where Mt. Zion would become something like Everest, and Jerusalem the place from which all humanity would learn decency and sanity and balance and reason. *"For a law shall go forth from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. God shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes between the peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks."* The point being that the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus from Jerusalem would usher the world into a state that was really, measurably better than anything anyone ever experienced before Jesus ever came.

And I would argue that what Isaiah saw in his vision of the Holy City as the guiding center of the planet has already begun to take place. The world is really, measurably better now that the gospel of Jesus has been interwoven into the thoughts and feelings and customs of so many of the world's societies. The ancient world was a dog eat dog, law of the jungle, no rights, no mercy sort of place. There was nothing like a Geneva Convention before Jesus walked the earth, the physically weak and physically poor, women and children, people without property or resources or strength were absolutely at the mercy of the strong.

So many of the rights and privileges we take for granted from birth, simply didn't exist before Word went out from Zion to the world's peoples that Moses declared all people, men women and children from everywhere, as having been made in the image of God, just Jesus taught that even our enemies were due some measure of mercy and compassion and understanding, even those who persecute us are worthy of our prayers if we lack the power to make them stop.

Which is not to say that real gospel values have enjoyed anything like ideal, universal acceptance. Recently a friend of mine in church reminded me that her American grandmother could not vote, could not own property, could not make a motion in court because she was a woman. Our history has seen Christians make a theological case that people from Africa deserved to be slaves because of some obscure curse Noah brought against one of his grandsons, Canaan, whose descendants didn't end up on the African continent.

The point being that stubborn, intractable sin can blind us to what the word of God really says even if we hear it every week. That why God has planted churches in all kinds of cultures, so that there will be brothers and sisters elsewhere who don't share the hatreds and prejudices that our culture has bred. And in the end, since Christ and Easter and Pentecost the Word has gone out and that gives us a shot, if we're open and willing to let our minds and hearts bend to the words really say.

So, later in his book, Isaiah would warn believers from everywhere that knowing God and finding Christ would require us to take to heart all sorts of things that no one culture can teach us. So he exhorts us, *"Seek the LORD while he may be found, call on him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the LORD that he may have compassion on him...For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts."*