

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Occasion: Proper 14

Sunday, August 11, 2019

Year (cycle): C

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The Collect:

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Reading 1

Old Testament:

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

1 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.

10 Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!

Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

11 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.

12 When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?

Trample my courts no more;

13 bringing offerings is futile;

incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
17 learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.
18 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.
19 If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
20 but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Book Summary

Passage Summary

This book can be divided into two (and possibly three) parts. Chapters 1 to 39 were written before the exile, from about 740 BC to about 700 BC. These were difficult times for the southern kingdom, Judah: a disastrous war was fought with Syria; the Assyrians conquered Israel, the northern kingdom, in 723 BC, and threatened Judah. Isaiah saw the cause of these events as social injustice, which he condemned, and against which he fought valiantly. Chapters 40 to 66 were written during and after the Exile in Babylon. They are filled with a message of trust and confident hope that God will soon end the Exile. Some scholars consider that Chapters 56 to 66 form a third part of the book, written after the return to the Promised Land. These chapters speak of hope and despair; they berate the people for their sin, for worshipping other gods. Like *Second Isaiah*, this part speaks of the hope that God will soon restore Jerusalem to its former glory and make a new home for all peoples.

Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20

V. 1 is the superscription of the book: the first 39 chapters of Isaiah tell of Isaiah's "vision":

backward, into the historical origins of Israel and its pact with God; in the present situation, of Israel's disobedience to God, and of impending judgement; and forward, to when the relationship God always intended to have with his people may be restored.

The kings listed reigned 783-687 BC.

V. 4 tells of God's father-child relationship with Judah (the south). The child has rebelled against her caring parent. She has been invaded by Assyrian armies; of her cities, only Jerusalem remains free (v. 8). The other cities have been destroyed, but not devastated like "Sodom" (vv. 9, 10) and "Gomorrah". Isaiah speaks mostly to the "rulers" (v. 10, those responsible for just judgements) but also to the people: listen to God's instructions ("teaching")! God is tired of people who go through the motions of worship but without sincerity. He will no longer accept their worship (and even their "prayers", v. 15), for they mistreat the poor and helpless (v. 17). Their behaviour is an "abomination" (v. 13) to him. Note God's nine *imperatives* in vv. 12-17, e.g. "Trample ... no more", "wash yourselves" (v. 16) ritually. (People worshipped at the time of the "new moon", on the "sabbath", at *convocations* and at "appointed festivals". "My soul", v. 14, means *I*.) God will no longer listen to their pleas. He will however give Judah an opportunity to "argue it out" (v. 18) before him as judge. "Scarlet" was the colour for wickedness; white ("like snow") stood for purity. The rulers and people have a choice: either be "willing and obedient" (v. 19), and be prosperous materially and spiritually; or "refuse and rebel" (v. 20), and be totally devastated by the Assyrian invaders.

Reflection:

There are promise and mercy, faithfulness (or lack thereof) and fulfillment threaded throughout each of the lectionary readings for this proper. Even in the harsh reproach of the Lord to Judah and Jerusalem in this passage from Isaiah, there is, ultimately, a promise of mercy—scarlet sins turned white as snow, as wool—even as the people’s empty sacrifices and half-hearted, insincere worship has stretched YHWH’s patience beyond the breaking point. The people have been mindlessly attending to the letter of the law, offering prayers and sacrifices, even as they’ve ignored the spirit behind it, as evidenced by the need to remind them of what doing good looks like: caring for the most vulnerable among them—the oppressed, the orphan, the widow. Divine utter disappointment is underscored by God’s very grammar in this passage; the great “I Am” (Exod. 3:14) proclaiming, remarkably, “I am weary...I have had enough... I cannot endure.”

Whereas everything that cannot be endured is emphatically expressed in terms of the second-person possessive pronoun, your: your sacrifices, your new moons, your appointed festivals, your hands full of blood. In other words, nothing the people are doing, whether within the Temple or without, has anything to do with “I Am”. Yet even after all that, YHWH still seeks relationship, is willing to “argue it out”, and even still willing to promise mercy: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.”

- In what ways is our worship half-hearted today? How might we be more aware and intentional in our individual and corporate worship?
- Who are the most vulnerable in your community? How does your worship influence their needs or seek after their justice?

Reading 2

Psalm 50: 1-8, 23-24

- 1 The Lord, the God of gods, has spoken; *
he has called the earth from the rising of the sun to
its setting.
- 2 Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty, *
God reveals himself in glory.
- 3 Our God will come and will not keep silence; *
before him there is a consuming flame,
and round about him a raging storm.
- 4 He calls the heavens and the earth from above *
to witness the judgment of his people.
- 5 “Gather before me my loyal followers, *
those who have made a covenant with me
and sealed it with sacrifice.”
- 6 Let the heavens declare the rightness of his cause; *
for God himself is judge.
- 7 Hear, O my people, and I will speak:
“O Israel, I will bear witness against you; *
for I am God, your God.
- 8 I do not accuse you because of your sacrifices; *
your offerings are always before me.
- 23 Consider this well, you who forget God, *
lest I rend you and there be none to deliver you.
- 24 Whoever offers me the sacrifice of thanksgiving
honors me; *
but to those who keep in my way will I show
the salvation of God.”

Book Summary	Passage Summary
<p>Psalms Psalms is a collection of collections. The psalms were written over many centuries, stretching from the days of Solomon's temple (about 950 BC) to after the Exile (about 350 BC.) Psalms are of five types: hymns of praise, laments, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Within the book, there are five "books"; there is a doxology ("Blessed be ... Amen and Amen") at the end of each book.</p>	<p>Psalm 50: 108, 22-23</p> <p>This is a liturgy of divine judgement. God “summons” the whole earth and the “heavens” (v. <u>4</u>) to witness his legal judgement of the ungodly. In Jerusalem (“Zion”, v. <u>2</u>) he shows himself in traditional Old Testament ways: in “fire” (v. <u>3</u>) and “tempest”. He will be both “judge” (v. <u>6</u>) and prosecuting attorney (“testify ...”, v. <u>7</u>). Animal sacrifices sincerely offered are acceptable to him (v. <u>8</u>), but offering sacrifices as mere ritual is not; indeed it is needless slaughter of his creatures (vv. <u>9-13</u>). Reciting the Law without the intention of keeping it (v. <u>16</u>) is to mock him: not obeying him, ignoring his advice, befriending thieves and “adulterers” (v. <u>18</u>), slandering family members, and thinking that he is evil too (v. <u>22</u>), are the grounds for God’s case against the wicked, “you who forget God” (v. <u>22</u>). They will be destroyed, but those who “honour” (v. <u>23</u>) him, who walk in his “way” , will be rewarded with “salvation”, prosperity.</p>

Reflection:

Whereas in Isaiah, God is prepared to “argue it out” with the people, in Psalm 50 it is clear that YHWH is neither plaintiff nor defendant; rather, “God himself is judge” (50:6). This ultimate sovereignty is more eloquently highlighted in the very first three words of the psalm in Hebrew. In translation, we read the opening phrase as, “The Lord, the God of gods”. But in Hebrew, the opening phrase is simply a stark and powerful repetition and intensification of the names of God: ’el, ’elohim, yhwh. It’s as if the psalmist is singing God’s name ever more deeply and plaintively: God,

GOD, God Whose Name Is Beyond Human Language, whose very speech creates the world in which we live—that is the One with whom we have made a covenant, and even more astonishingly, has covenanted with us. And as in the above passage from Isaiah, those who hear this psalm are reminded that faithfulness is more than simply performing some ritual or fulfilling the letter of any law. What truly honors is constant remembrance of and thanksgiving for the One whose “mercy is everlasting[,] and [whose] faithfulness endures from age to age” (Psalm 100:4).

- How might you remind yourself of God’s promises when you drift into forgetfulness?
- Can you imagine being as patient with other’s shortcomings as God is with ours?

Reading 3

Epistle:

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith 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.

8 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. 9 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. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 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.

12 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.’

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Book Summary

Passage Summary

Apart from the concluding verses (which may have been added later), this book is a treatise (or sermon) rather than a letter. Its name comes from its approach to Christianity: it is couched in Judaic terms. The identity of the author is unknown; Origen, c. 200 said that "only God knows" who wrote Hebrews. The book presents an elaborate analysis, arguing for the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Christ as revealer and mediator of God's grace. Basing his argument on the Old Testament, the author argues for the superiority of Christ to the prophets, angels and Moses. Christ offers a superior priesthood, and his sacrifice is much more significant than that of Levite priests. Jesus is the "heavenly" High Priest, making the true sacrifice for the sins of the people, but he is also of the same flesh and blood as those he makes holy.

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

The author has urged his readers to recall the time after they were baptised: they endured hardships: – public abuse, persecution and “plundering of your possessions” ([10:34](#)), accepting these privations cheerfully “knowing that you ... possessed something better and more lasting”. So, he urges, “do not abandon ... that confidence of yours” ([10:35](#)). “You need endurance” ([10:36](#)) to “receive what was promised” (i.e. eternal life with Christ). Christ will come again; keep your faith in him.

In the Revised English Bible, [11:1](#) reads “Faith gives substance to our hopes and convinces us of the realities we do not see”. Through faith we know that, at creation time, the invisible was transformed into the visible by God’s command (“the word of God”, v. [3](#)) and that the course of history (“worlds”) was set by God. The author now gives examples of Old Testament figures who lacked the “promises” (v. [13](#)) we have but even so had faith in God; they “received [God’s] approval” (v. [2](#)). “Abraham” (v. [8](#)) trusted that he would have a land to inherit; he didn’t know “where he was going”. He (as we do) lived a temporary life on earth (“in tents”, v. [9](#)) as he “looked forward” (v. [10](#)) to living permanently (“foundations”) in “the city”, the heavenly Jerusalem, “a better country” (v. [16](#)). In this he is seen to resemble the Christian believer. (Most translations say that Sarah received the “power of procreation”, v. [11](#)). Through the faith of Abraham and Sarah, many “descendants were born” (v. [12](#)). These figures (exemplars) saw that Christ would come (v. [13](#)). (In Genesis, actually only Abraham said he was a *stranger and a foreigner*.) God is proud (“not ashamed”, v. [16](#)) of them for electing to exercise trust in him; he has prepared a place for them in heaven.

Reflection:

The themes of promise and faithfulness also oscillate at the heart of Paul's letter to the Hebrews. He begins this chapter of his letter with the helpful, eloquent, and much-quoted definition of faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). The Greek *pistis/pistos*, faith/faithful, appears eight times in these twelve verses, five of those in the rhetorical anaphora of the repeated initial phrase "By faith." Notably, *epangelia*, promise, is referenced four times—not to mention the promises implicit in "inheritance" (11:8) and the city prepared for the faithful by God (11:16). In language reminiscent of Psalm 50:1, Paul proclaims that "by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God" (11:3).

If in the passages from Isaiah and the psalm we are given examples of apostasy and hypocritical worship, Paul's letter to the Hebrews calls on the exemplary commitment of another ancestor, Abraham, who by faith obeyed whole-heartedly. In his steadfast faith, and even in his old age, he received the promise of descendants, "as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Gen. 22:17; 15:5). The incalculable patience and mercy of God are superseded only the exponential nature of God's promise-keeping to the faithful, a fulfillment with far-reaching implications: "By your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice" (Gen. 22:18). All this, not through fulfilling the law, but by unwavering faith.

- How do you talk about faithfulness in your church? In your home? In the world beyond both?
- In what way do your obedience and faithfulness live up to God's mercy and promise?

Reading 4

Gospel:

Luke 12:32-40

32 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 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. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

35 'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. 38 If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

39 'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Book Summary

Three gospels in the New Testament offer similar portraits of the life of Jesus; Luke is the third of them. Its author, traditionally Luke the physician who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys, draws on three sources: Mark (via Matthew), a collection of sayings (known as Q for *Quelle*, German for *source*) and his own source. It is a gospel that emphasizes God's love for the poor, the disadvantaged, minorities, outcasts, sinners and lepers. Women play a more prominent part than in the other gospels. Luke never uses Semitic words; this is one argument for thinking that he wrote primarily for Gentiles.

Passage Summary

Luke 12: 32-40

Jesus has told his disciples, in the presence of a large crowd, the story of the farmer who, keeping all of his huge harvest for himself, completely obliterated God from his life. Wealth *per se* is acceptable, but abusing it is not. To “strive for his kingdom” (v. [31](#)) is much more important than acquisition of material goods: “life is more than food” (v. [23](#)). Trust in God’s care of you! He knows what you need, and will give it you. Now Jesus calls his disciples “little flock” (v. [32](#)), for they are few, and oppressed (“do not be afraid”). (In Ezekiel [34](#), God speaks of his people as his “flock”.) They will be citizens of “the kingdom”. Avoid over-attachment to “possessions” (v. [33](#)) and share what you have with the needy (“give alms”). Emphasize your relationship with God, not material wealth; integrity with him lasts, but wealth ends with the grave. In vv. [35-40](#), Jesus tells a parable about vigilance and loyalty. Jews expected a great “banquet” when the Messiah came; Christians recognize this banquet as being with Christ, symbolizing our complete union with him. It will inaugurate fulfilment of the kingdom. The “master” (v. [36](#)) is Christ himself: he serves the slaves at the banquet! (“have them sit down ...”, v. [37](#)) (The master will tuck his long Oriental robes into his “belt” to give him freedom of movement to serve them.) Christ, “the Son of Man” (v. [40](#)) like a “thief” (v. [39](#)), may come at any time: you must be ready whenever he comes.

Reflection:

Luke's Gospel begins with a particular dedication to "Theophilus" (literally, "beloved of God"), in which the author writes of setting down "an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1). This dedication is followed in quick order by the foretelling of two events: the births of first John the Baptist, then of Jesus. It is then followed in turn by two exquisite hymns particular to Luke: Mary's beautiful Song of Praise, the Magnificat; and Zechariah's Benedictus. Together, these hymns, the initial verses, and dedication not only explicitly illustrate the twin themes of promise and fulfillment, but they also greatly inform the passage at hand; for not only are promise and fulfillment threaded throughout Luke's writings, they are distinctly imminent in his Gospel, as this passage illustrates. The fullness of time overflows in Luke; keeping watch is prayer, and faithfulness is both a means and an end. Therefore, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit" (12:35).

- Is there room in the name "Theophilus" for you, beloved of God? Can you hear Luke speaking directly to you?
- What does it mean to love God with all your heart? What does that look like in your life?