

Isaiah 1 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

**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.

## The Wickedness of Judah

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>The ox knows its owner,  
and the donkey its master's crib;  
but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand.

<sup>4</sup>Ah, sinful nation,  
people laden with iniquity,  
offspring who do evil,  
children who deal corruptly,  
who have forsaken the LORD,  
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,  
who are utterly estranged!

<sup>5</sup>Why do you seek further beatings?  
Why do you continue to rebel?  
The whole head is sick,  
and the whole heart faint.

<sup>6</sup>From the sole of the foot even to the head,  
there is no soundness in it,  
but bruises and sores  
and bleeding wounds;  
they have not been drained, or bound up,  
or softened with oil.

<sup>7</sup>Your country lies desolate,  
your cities are burned with fire;  
in your very presence

aliens devour your land;  
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

<sup>8</sup>And daughter Zion is left  
like a booth in a vineyard,  
like a shelter in a cucumber field,  
like a besieged city.

<sup>9</sup>If the LORD of hosts  
had not left us a few survivors,  
we would have been like Sodom,  
and become like Gomorrah.

<sup>10</sup>Hear the word of the LORD,  
you rulers of Sodom!  
Listen to the teaching of our God,  
you people of Gomorrah!

<sup>11</sup>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.

<sup>12</sup>When you come to appear before me,<sup>[a]</sup>  
who asked this from your hand?  
Trample my courts no more;

<sup>13</sup>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.

<sup>14</sup>Your new moons and your appointed festivals  
my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me,  
I am weary of bearing them.

<sup>15</sup>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.

<sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;

cease to do evil,

<sup>17</sup> learn to do good;

seek justice,

rescue the oppressed,

defend the orphan,

plead for the widow.

<sup>18</sup>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.

<sup>19</sup>If you are willing and obedient,  
you shall eat the good of the land;

<sup>20</sup>but if you refuse and rebel,  
you shall be devoured by the sword;  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Romans 12:2 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup>Do not be conformed to this world,<sup>[a]</sup> but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.<sup>[b]</sup>

**Isaiah 43:15 – 19b**

<sup>15</sup>I am the LORD, your Holy One,  
the Creator of Israel, your King.

<sup>16</sup>Thus says the LORD,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,

<sup>17</sup>who brings out chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;

they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

<sup>18</sup>Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.

<sup>19</sup>I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

**August 11, 2019**

**Isaiah 1:1-20; Isaiah 43:15-19a; Romans 12:2**

**God's Constructive Criticism**

**Kerra Becker English**

Going to a museum with my husband, Chuck, is different from going to museums with “regular people.” As someone who has had a long and meandering career with informal educational institutions, often as the educational liaison for museums, he looks at everything with a critical eye. You will hear that this exhibit is too text-heavy, or that too many of the hands-on options are broken to make it fun for kids. Fortunately, he usually talks about both the highs and the lows. He positively gushed about the Maryland science center’s exhibit of locally discovered dinosaur fossils, but he will also give you his plan for what he would hypothetically fix if *such and such* museum were willing to raise the \$5 million it would take to make it the best it could be.

Though I may make fun of him for that, I was reminded last week that I do the exact same thing when I go to large church gatherings and conferences. I’m going to be critical of the workshops and the preaching. I’m going to pick apart what’s useful to me, and I’m likely to be the one to ask an unwelcome question or two of either a presenter or a participant when I disagree. I will diligently fill out my survey at the end with my version of the highs and lows, and though I wish this weren’t true, I will have noticed every grammatical mistake made in the brochures and handouts. I am a tough audience – because it is something I care about. I want to be fed with solid theology, a sound presenting style, and to know that my church, the larger part of it, is struggling as mightily as I am to understand and proclaim the gospel in today’s world.

My opinions are, shall we say, fairly strong, when it comes to my understanding of what the church “should” be and how we “should” get where we want to go.

Going to something like the Big Tent conference can bring out the best and the worst in me. I can’t “just” participate or “just” enjoy it. Which is a little bit sad – because there are times I need to worship and be fed – just as I would hope might happen for others when I am leading worship. That inner critic can be disruptive and petty, but there are also times when that inner critic leads me to a greater understanding. Facebook has already discovered in their algorithms that you pay the most amount of attention to a post, not when you agree with it, but when it makes you good and surly. Sometimes being jarred or discomforted can also engage your heart and mind to learn a deeper lesson.

So, of course, there was that one sermon there that I really didn’t like. It rubbed me the wrong way and made me cringe with its driving message. And yet, the pastor who was delivering this message was passionate and biblical and knew exactly how to ride the energy of her listeners. There was nothing about her that was boring, and the substance of the issues she was raising for the larger denomination had merit. All of that was spot on. But then she made that motivational speaker push that I absolutely hate. You aren’t doing your job as a Christian if you aren’t giving it 100%. In fact, she had us sing a song that used the refrain, “Lord I’m runnin’, tryin’ to make a 100, because 99 and a half won’t do.”

Ugh. And in order to get to this 100%, whatever that means, she said we would have to change our boring white people music to something more contemporary and upbeat, and provide whatever it is that will engage young people, and fight the good fight for justice, and rah, rah – keep on winning for Jesus. OK, now you can see where my inner critic gets all petty. It wasn’t just that, but she lost me when it became about being perfect. Getting the perfect A is what it’s

all about, or it just isn't good enough. I have a problem with that. I grew up feeling the pressure to be that straight A kid, and trying to do it all for everyone, and in the end it's nothing but a great big wheel of always trying to measure up, and then waiting for that time it doesn't work out and the 89% B+ feels like a total disaster.

But I grew up, and messed up, and learned, and changed. You see, I learned from my theological and pastoral mentors to be a realist, and trust me, it was a huge relief when I could let those expectations of perfection go. I know that y'all don't have 100% of your time, and energy, and resources to give to the church. In fact, I really don't want you to. This is a place where the load is shared and perfection must be left to Jesus alone because we are fallible, inconsistent, and sometimes even tired and cranky human beings. Pasting on the shiny, happy, Christian face and running around trying to meet all the whims and desires of any one particular generation or demographic would be exhausting. Let alone, we are guaranteed to fail miserably when we try to be all things for all people. I think any one church is at its best when it is being authentically who it is, and then trusts the church down the street that is reaching a different group of people to do the same.

The perfection thing just not my schtick. And I'm pretty sure after more than 20 years in ministry that there's not any one musical repertoire, or youth program, or worship ambiance that meets some guideline of liturgical perfection or has people departing on an entertainment high that is going to turn the church into this miracle of miracles where every knee will bow and every tongue confess the name of Jesus. *Not how it works. Not by a long shot.* It is the Spirit's work to change minds and hearts, and my hunch is that even as the Presbyterian Church USA is trying to figure itself out and make all its strategic plans, the true heartbeat of our faith is going to continue to happen the way it has always happened, on the relationship level, not so much on the

institutional level. We can work at it. We can come together to share ideas and do Bible study, and hear the Word proclaimed in a great variety of ways. But are we going to have a magical solution to mainline Protestant church decline? I seriously doubt it. We can barely call ourselves mainline with integrity anymore, and that's just fine by me. I suspect that those who need church will always find it – and they may find it in this building, or they may simply find it in you. That's how the miracle works – forget the magic.

But that's the shortened version of Kerra's constructive criticism when it comes to church conferencing. The sermon title for today promises something more than that, something deeper than that. What exactly does God criticize? Where does God's constructive criticism take us? Maybe we church people should want to know something more about that. Through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, God says, "I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity." That's a potent line – and one that we are inclined to gloss over. The institutional part of the church is in love with solemn assemblies. Seriously, assembling is what we do; it's how we judge our success. Did we do worship well? That's what the brand new surveys of our denominational well-being are inclined to measure. Do we worship with vitality? If then answer is yes, then we pat ourselves on the back and believe that we are done. Funny to find out that the God we proclaim to worship with great adoration is less concerned about our worship than about how we treat each other. If you're worship is solemn, appropriate, and these days also exciting and happy, fine. But if there's sin lurking around your assembly – God may choose to look elsewhere to notice more improved human interactions.

Now my hunch is that worship itself is a very fluid thing. It can happen in sanctuaries, and stadiums, and parks. Worshippers can sing hymns or praise choruses. The table can be set with a common loaf or with cups and trays. Pastors can preach faithfully whether they are loud

and dynamic or quiet and reflective. There may be multiple rooms for all the youth programs and a full nursery, or just one tender lap where a baby rests her head. Even as we try to move away from measuring as my workshop put it “in butts and bucks,” we still don’t quite get the matrix right according to some of today’s passages.

Just so we don’t begin to think that the line about solemn assemblies is a lone fluke in scripture, Isaiah hits it hard again, as do other of the prophetic texts which speak always into our discomfort. We tend to use that line about God doing a new thing when we want to freshen up worship a bit. God is doing a new thing – and it looks a lot like the old thing with a fresh coat of paint on it. What we neglect to do is read the verses that precede it. Let me share those again.

<sup>5</sup>I am the LORD, your Holy One,  
the Creator of Israel, your King.

<sup>16</sup>Thus says the LORD,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,

<sup>17</sup>who brings out chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;

they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

What do those words remind you of? Yes – the Passover. And what does God say next through the prophet’s words? Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. For as many times as we hear to remember the Passover, this is one time where God says forget about it. This would be like God telling us to forget Christmas, to skip Easter next year. The text

reminds us that we are to forget even our most important religious traditions and celebrations IF it means you have to do something to revitalize your relationships. Forget it if you have to go make amends with your neighbor first. Forget it if you have evil to reckon with in the world. Forget it if your solemn assemblies are mired in sin and filled with iniquity. God will make rivers in the desert to get that to happen.

This is not comforting to a pastor who has studied hard and made a career out of working diligently to create vital worship and theologically interesting Bible studies. But it is a reminder that Jesus, in his own work and ministry, was about listening to and following a God of love. He set us up in communities, churches, discipleship groups so we could learn more about how to treat one another with respect and compassion. He was critical of any tradition that cared more about its own perpetuation than about how it treated those meant to be sustained by it. He demonstrated time and again that caring for the brokenhearted and injured was far more important than the laws of cleanliness. And Paul continues to have us ask ourselves the question if we are being transformed by what GOD considers good, and acceptable, and complete – mimicking the same structure that is in the creation story of Genesis. This whole world is set up to be God's good world. So whatever it is we do in our church time together should be a reflection that God sees of the amazing structure of the created order, and then calls it good.

I am tempted – just as you are tempted, I know – to act on what is right, on the way it is supposed to be, or the thing that will make an event or service perfect. That's not what God is looking for. God wants to know, is it good? Does it bring people together? The rest, well, it doesn't matter quite as much as we might like it too, and the gift that is from the person who has little time or energy or resources is just as valuable as the person's gift that is large or special or somehow exactly right.

I've seen churches grow or shrink of every tradition and variety. What sends the death knell of a congregation though, or at least begins the decline is not caring about how relationships work. Those churches may sustain on fumes for some time, but they wither in their ability to do mission and ministry. Any church where there is back-biting, gossip, rudeness, you get it – will not keep people coming. Churches that grow as God would have us grow are accepting, loving, and almost always tossed out the goal of perfection a long, long time ago. Ashland Presbyterian Church, you know you are called to love. You know you have been sent to serve this community. Will you worship with vitality? Most of the time, you will. As long as we choose to love God as we love others, it will show. Will we do things perfectly, or even always decently and in order? Oh, probably not. You love on some interns, and it's my goal to have them make mistakes here so they learn from them before their first calls. I joked at the Big Tent conference with a former colleague that I've never talked about my mistakes so much as now that I am a supervisor for interns. I tell them my blunders so they will be more free to share their own. And I have to say, I think God is pretty OK with that. Do you have to make a perfect A here? I certainly hope not. And I bet our returning college students are also grateful for being in a place where grades don't count. Let's work to keep it that way. Amen.

May you love God so much that you love nothing else too much, and may you fear God enough that you fear nothing else at all.