

If there is one thing I've learned with the various Christian denominations I've had the pleasure and privilege of working with over the years, it's that you need to learn the proper language. When I worked with Episcopalians, there were a bit of pre-service logistics to put together. You needed an acolyte to get the candle lighter from the sacristy before the processional; everyone needed to vest, which could be a cassock, alb, surplice, or a combination, depending on the liturgical time of year; the priest needed the correct color stole and, if they were using a chasuble, to decide if they would wear it for the entire service or just for celebrating Eucharist, not communion, and, if that was the case, where was it being stored and who was helping them get in and out of it; the vergers needed to get their verges; if the acolyte who was serving as crucifer was a child, you needed to ensure they could safely carry the cross; you needed to light the thurible and double check that the person serving as thurifer was properly trained; communicate if you were lining up in the narthex or the nave; and agree on how close to the chancel the processional was getting before people broke off to head to their assigned seats. And may the Lord help you if the bishop was visiting, because that's when things would get complicated, and you might even need to find a boat bearer.

When I started working here, Rev. Kevin and I had a few moments of confusion as I learned how to speak Presbyterian. He asked me to put the cross on the table in the sanctuary, so away I went. I saw the end table looking things over there. I ended up in the narthex, which is the entry way in the back of the church, where there were yet more tables, but it didn't make sense to put the cross in either of those locations. I even checked in at the livestream table, but that made even less sense. I was very confused. Where was this table? I assume Rev. Kevin was slightly concerned that it was taking the new guy twenty minutes to put something on a table, so he checked in on me. I told him I didn't understand why the cross needed to go on a table, let alone which one, and we exchanged rather confused looks. And then, we had a simultaneous moment of revelation. The table. That's a table. See, Presbyterians have tables. Episcopalians and Lutherans? We have altars. Later, when I was looking for the chalice and paten, I asked someone where the sacristy was, which led to more confusion as I tried to explain what I was looking for, and they asked if I was referring to the room where the communion stuff was kept, and the plate and cup that were used. Yes. Yes I was.

So we see this morning, in Isaiah, that the people knew the language. They knew what rituals they needed to do, at what times, with what readings; they knew the mechanics. But, much like when a visiting priest didn't check the bulletin they were sent earlier in the week and then wrote their sermon on the wrong reading, just knowing how you're supposed to show up doesn't mean that you are spiritually showing up.

God is making it abundantly clear that the people living in Judah have abjectly, or completely, failed. The verses that are skipped over colorfully highlight just how bad things have become. The spiritual sickness is such that it is comparable to a diseased body, or a barren land. And God wants there to be no misunderstanding about how bad things have become. There were several types of sacrifices, involving what parts were or weren't burnt, if people could eat parts of it, that's its own sermon. But the one constant was the fat. The fat was always burned. It was something that only God could have. So the fat of their sacrifices, the very part that only God was worthy of, was repellant. Congratulations, you have managed to make profane a part of the sacrifice that only God has access to. And the animals that are mentioned? Those are the expensive sacrifices. This isn't a couple of doves. Not only were these animals expensive to raise, but they had to be perfect. No blemishes, not a singular misplaced tuft of hair. That effort and money? Disgusting. Blood was a symbol of the covenant, a symbol of life. That very symbol was offensive.

And saying that God "had enough" is a bit of an understatement. The Hebrew word used can also be understood as "sate", or even "gorge". It's not the kind of "having enough" that causes you to turn down a snack. It's the "having enough" that makes you sick to your stomach. God is so full of their empty sacrifices that God is nauseous. And people just keep burning animals, keep piling on what they're supposed to be doing.

If that wasn't enough, not even the incense was acceptable. It is an abomination. But not *just* an abomination. It's morally disgusting, and this word is often used in reference to idol worship. You are worshiping God, but you might as well be worshiping an idol. Arguably, that might even be better; at least they'd be being honest about who, or what, they're putting their faith in. And let's make it worse, because why was incense used? Incense was, in part, a symbolic representation of prayers going up to God. This is how God is seeing their prayers. Worship is meant to bring us into communion, into relationship, with God. It's not meant to be a choreographed performance.

And here's blood, again. Hands full of blood. That's a bit of a play on words; there's the literal blood, from the sacrifices, but also their guilt and culpability, or responsibility, for causing harm. It might seem a little odd, to us, for the reading to pivot from worship practices to seeking justice, or defending orphans, but this was one in the same. God's law, the Torah, included lifestyle practices and worship instructions, but it also included caring for the vulnerable. To obey God and keep God's laws, you had to seek justice just as much as you had to pray. Devotion was intersectional, not either/or, and it was found where your justice towards humanity intersected with your love for God. You could not, and cannot, claim to love God when you don't love all of God's creation. God doesn't qualify God's love, so what right do we have to do so? Jesus died and rose for every person. No ifs, ands, or buts. Loving neighbor and, by extension, loving God, means you have to get off of your butts. "Of course I love my neighbor, but...". Get off your butts. Let's hold

onto one but. God created all of creation. All of it. We have to not just love our neighbor, but also love and care for God's creation. For the earth. For our environment. This just keeps getting harder.

Especially when God mentions justice. How do we channel this love into justice, into equality, for all people? There's a catchy phrase, "No Justice, No Peace, Know Justice, Know Peace". The first two "no"s are n-o, the second two are k-n-o-w. If there is no justice, there is no peace, but if you know what justice is you will know what peace is. But is that really accurate? Peace is subjective, it depends on the person. If you ask an Israeli and a Palestinian what peace is, or a Russian and a Ukrainian, you are going to get very different answers. Humanity is messy, it's disorganized, it's confusing. Yet we are called to honor God by honoring and loving humanity. We worship a God of the margins, not a God of the comfortable middle. Worship happens here, at FPCG, but worship also happens on Thursday mornings, at the Crisis Ministry's food pantry, or at any of the numerous outreach programs in Kensington.

So we've figured out just how far the people in Judah have fallen, and God has made abundantly clear his anger, frustration, and disappointment with them. But why? What exactly did they do? Well, let's get uncomfortable and name the elephant in the room. Sodom. In verse ten, God called the people living in Judah the "rulers of Sodom". If there are any Bible stories that can cause immediate reactions, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is right at the top. The previous verse, verse nine, reads that "if the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah".

So what was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? Simply put, hospitality. Rather, the bastardization, or corruption, of what hospitality was meant to be. And the rest of this chapter leans into this; in verse 21, "how the faithful city has become a whore, righteousness lodged in her, but now murders; verse 23, your princess are rebels and companions of thieves, everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts; I think we're getting a pretty clear picture of what was going on in Judah and, by extension, Sodom.

All the way back in Genesis, there was Abraham, and three travelers visited him. Abraham invited them to sit in the shade, he had his wife bake bread, he slaughtered an animal for them, he even got them water to wash their feet. And he had never seen these men before, he didn't know their names. They were just walking by. These men, later understood as angels, left Abraham's to go to Sodom. God had heard of the sin of Sodom, heard their outcry, and was sending angels to verify what he had heard.

Sodom was an affluent, wealthy city. Earlier in Genesis, Lot notes that the city was "like the garden of God". Sodom was a land of abundance and a land of beauty. Many Bible stories don't give us a full backstory because the people reading or hearing the stories would have already known

them. But we're removed from these stories by thousands of years and miles. So what was Sodom like?

Part of Jewish theology and thought are *midrashim*, plural for *midrash*. It's a way of scripture interpretation that was developed by rabbis. *Midrashim* go beyond what is written and into the history, the laws that connect to the story, they generally help clarify and expand on the legal and moral teachings that are held in scripture. A *midrash* takes a story you know, and expands on it in a way that is faithful to the context and the meaning of the story. Some of the *midrashim* can be taken literally, while others are parables, or use metaphors to get the point across. For example, if you were to say that someone would steal from their own mother, it might not be that you have seen them do so, but that their ethics are such that they would have no problem robbing their mother. It is when we take a look at Sodom's history, and the *midrashim* around Sodom, that we see where the problem is. And there are a lot of stories.

Despite being a prosperous city, Sodom did not want to share its fortune and took great effort to keep travelers out. One example given is that Sodom charged four *zuzim*, which were coins, and I'm not getting into the weeds with conversion rates, to cross the bridge that led to the city gates. If you tried to avoid the fee by swimming, you'd be charged eight *zuzim*. The *Talmud*, which is a collection of Jewish law and thought and expands on the Torah, tells us that a traveler swam the river because he didn't want to pay the fee, but he did not know about the penalty. When stopped by guards at the city gate, he refused to pay, so the guards beat him. Understandably, the traveler went to the magistrate who, instead of providing justice, told him that he not only had to pay the eight *zuzim*, but he had to reward each guard because the occasional bloodletting was thought to have medical benefits. The assaulted man owed the guards for their kindness. Another story goes that Sodom made sure every guest had a bed that fit them perfectly. The bed was the same size; if you were too short, you'd be stretched to fit and, if you were too tall, your feet would be cut off. And there's more. Yet another story tells us about a beggar who was surprised that, when begging for alms in Sodom, every person gave him a coin. But no one would sell him food. When he finally died from hunger, everyone who had given him a coin stopped by his body because they had written their name on the coin that they gave him, and they were re-collecting their money. That's why no one had sold the man food.

God heard the cries of the oppressed, of the mistreated, of the dying. The cry of his people that God sent the angels to investigate? According to a *midrash*, that final cry came from a "maiden of Sodom", a young woman who was being burned to death for sneaking food to a beggar.

So we have Sodom, a land of plenty. But they do not care for the traveler, for the outsider, for those on the margins. It is costly to enter; even more costly and dangerous to sneak, or smuggle, yourself into, with the real risk of being assaulted by keepers of the law if caught; a place

where those who help the hungry and the needy are often punished; where assistance can be offered, but the requirements are so extensive that they are limited in who they can help and, even then, provide limited help. Why does this sound so familiar, and maybe a little too close to home? What if, instead of creating a new creation, and making God's kingdom come, we're making a new Sodom? A Sodom built out of our greed, our self-centeredness, our self-righteousness. To offer a bed, to offer hospitality, and requiring you to fit the exact standards for it, even if it means suffering or losing pieces of yourself in the process. This sounds a little like Sodom to me. And what does that mean to us? If we are living in a new Sodom, if we are culpable, or responsible, for this system, if we are complicit, or aiding, in this system, if we are actively building it, what does that say about us?

This is after we have heard the good news, the redeeming news, of Jesus. This is after we have been commanded to love. We are Easter people, people living in the joy and hope of the resurrection, people who have the privilege of sharing that love and good news with their neighbors. How is it that, today, in 2025, we are still committing the same sins from 8th century Judah? Our sinful nature? That's just an excuse. We know better. In the Torah, God taught us how to be better. In the Gospels, Jesus showed and taught us how to be better. And, in both instances, we were told the cost. And this is our response?

At the end of the reading, God lets us know what the way forward is going to look like. "Shall", can also be interpreted as "may", and I think that fits a bit better. If you do this, if you fix this, you may become like this. This salvation is attainable. It's not through good works, but you can't claim to love God if you are doing this to your neighbor. So it's not that the good works will get you a hall pass to heaven, it's showing that, when you say you love God, that you actually love God. Yeah, of course we love Jesus, and our neighbor, but not when it's inconvenient. Not when I have to share, or when those people move in next door.

Are you uncomfortable yet? Because I sure am. Reading this passage put up a very uncomfortable mirror for me to look into. On a larger scale, when reading the Bible, we see ourselves as Moses, but never as Pharaoh. In the Gospels, we see ourselves as the Egyptians that welcomed the Holy Family as refugees, not as Herod. We think of ourselves as the Good Samaritan, not as the persons crossing on the other side of the road. We see ourselves as Peter, being crucified for his faith, but not as Judas, looking out for your own self interests and not thinking of the potential consequences. We, naturally, want to be the good guy in our story. And there's nothing wrong with that. But how often do we slip into complacency, do we slip into the comfort of easy answers and half truths, because we just can't be bothered?

Thanks be to God that we have a Creator who sees us as her children, as people who do have the potential for good, no matter how far they fall. Let us argue it out, or reason it out, says

the Lord. I've said my piece, now let's reason a way forward. Because, through faith in God and in Jesus, there will always be a path home. As Paul reminds us in Romans, we have a God who withheld nothing from us, not even his son, so how could God not give us everything else?

We worship a God of infinite mercy and love. God uses us to answer prayers, and God calls us to see the sacred in all of creation. In each other, in nature, in the city workers who oftentimes look like they're installing potholes. And in ourselves.

Amen.