



Sermon Transcript March 8, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption Spring Training with Isaiah Isaiah 1:1-20

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 8, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Rev. Daniel Warriner. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Isaiah 1:1-20 ESV

¹ The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

² Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.

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

⁴ Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.

⁵ Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.

⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil.

⁷ Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

⁸ And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

⁹ If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear 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 well-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 has required of you this trampling of my courts?

¹³ Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations-- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ When you spread 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 deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead

the widow's cause.

¹⁸ "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as 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 eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Introduction

Spring Training is upon us and if you're like me, you're wondering - if Isaiah had a baseball card, what would it say? If Isaiah had a playing card, I think his stats would include:

Statistics for the Book of Isaiah

Birthplace: Jerusalem

Called to Majors: 740 B.C.

Retired at Latest: 686 B.C.

Eighth Century Prophet in the Southern Kingdom

Played Alongside Micah

Prophet under the reigns of Kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah

Awards:

First Major Prophetical Book

Most Quoted Prophet the New Testament

Second Most Quoted Old Testament Book in the New Testament

Isaiah's History: A Primer

We've been following the CASKET EMPTY outline and Isaiah falls under the section K for KINGS. And though I'm in K for KINGS this section seems to really focus on the message of the prophets speaking to God's people. P for PROPHETS. But since CASPET isn't even a word, K for KINGS and CASKET will work just fine. Throughout our CASKET EMPTY series, we have been following God's people throughout the history of Scripture. There is so much to be gained in this overview. It gives us a comprehensive report of the details and the stories. All these stories are told throughout Scripture in

various places.

And this is very typical style of writing for a Hebrew author - tell a story, tell it again from another angle, and then tell it again. That's how you could have prophets telling a story repeated in Kings, repeated in Chronicles, repeated in a minor prophet book later. Also, while we prefer stories in chronological order, that wouldn't be the automatic way for writers at the time Isaiah was preaching. If you attended the CASKET EMPTY Conference last Saturday, Carol Kaminski shared with us that the Prophets were ordered by significance and importance. We all know someone who tells the same stories a hundred times, well now you can tell them they tell stories in a Hebrew style. Instead of being offended, they may thank you for the compliment. There are so many places and ways that these stories are told in Scripture that it gets hard to keep track of the timelines and the families and the details. By following the CASKET EMPTY categories, we see an amazing grand overview of the Biblical Storyline playing out in history. I highly recommend the CASKET EMPTY books as a companion to the study, and the one-day conference last week was great way to see the whole Bible as one continuous story. I especially think it's helpful for seeing the ground rules that God places before his people and then zooming forward to see how they did not pay attention to these rules and how it affected them and their relationship with God.

It felt like just yesterday we were hearing about the Sinai Covenant that God made through Moses. Where God's people were liberated from slavery and miraculously brought to the place where they were united into a people. And the people stood there, and God said IF YOU DO THIS, I will bless you. And they responded with a "Yes" to God - "WE WILL DO THIS!"

God engages with his people and some seek God, and some seek idols. God acts mercifully and patiently with their disobedience. Though they neglect him, God keeps speaking to them by sending prophets to bring them back. The presence of the prophets is the sign of God's engagement with his people - his enduring mercy and grace. These prophets are a sign of his love to his people - calling them back to what is true and right. He calls to his people and he says - "Here is the way that is best for you, not that way."

When Isaiah was called up to the major leagues of being a prophet, he works in Judah. His message has two points. The first way that Isaiah calls for Judah to change is that way God's people were mistreating others. They weren't loving their neighbors. They weren't following the laws to care for the powerless or the poor. They were being called to seek justice and correct oppression. In verse 17, for example, he calls them to: "learn to do

good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." There were laws about how to farm, how to go about business and give extra to the needy. They weren't caring for the widows, the fatherless, those who needed justice. This is also a major and repeating theme throughout the whole of book of Isaiah. God cares for his people and wants them to act as an advocate for those who are needy. God wants to be glorified through them and their care for each other. But the people weren't acting in a way consistent with God's provision, God's character. For this behavior of injustice and the neglect for the hurting God sees them, in verse 15, with blood on their hands. They somehow bore responsibility to care for them and keep just courts and provide for those in need. They were supposed to represent him on earth, much like a prophet represented God to the people, but they failed to represent God well. This angered God. The offer was for them to turn and come to the true God for mercy and cleansing. But there would be judgment if they did not repent of being callous to their neighbors, verse 20 says they would be eaten by the sword - there would be judgment upon them if they did not turn back to God from their idols and injustice.

The second complaint raised by God through Isaiah was that God's people were worshipping other gods. Shockingly, it seems to me from verses 11 - 15 that they had the externals of their faith correct - they were having feasts, they were sacrificing, they were assembling for worship. They were doing the right stuff of worship in the activities of the faith! But they were also doing these things to other gods at the same time. It was the fact that they were devoting themselves to other gods, handmade gods, and this is what angered Yahweh, the one true and living God. It wasn't that they weren't worshipping the real God, it's that they were putting the true God into the same categories as the created deities. He was just one of the many they were worshipping. They were spectacularly breaking the first of the Ten Commandments about having not other gods and not bowing down to other carved images.

The people of Judah were worshipping other deities. Some of these false gods required sacrifices of money, food like grain or oil. Some of these deities required blood sacrifices -like a cow, an ox, a calf and some still required sacrifices of people. In fact, some of these so-called gods required child sacrifice. They would be sacrificed through water or by fire. Recall the request God made to Abraham about his son Isaac in Genesis 22. If you ever look into what was expected from other cultures, other gods, you read that account in Genesis 22 as a breath of fresh air! Abraham was incapable of having a child when Isaac was promised and then born. God asked Abraham to offer him up as a sacrifice, yet in a turn of events Yahweh doesn't require the death of Abraham's first-born and only son, Isaac. Deviating from the idolatry norm, God provides his own

substitute. A theme that carries throughout Scripture. Yet these lifeless carved deities that you carried with you required innocent blood to “answer” people’s prayers. In one account I came across describing idol worship, the hands of the idol were outstretched for the offering and a fire was kindled below the hands. The offering was placed into the hands of the idol to burn up in the flames, and in some cases if other offerings like grain were ineffective to get the idol to do what you wanted it to do, you would offer up a child.

There are consequences for their idolatry. They mingled worship of the true God with worship of gods and statues they hand-crafted or picked up from their neighbors. The effect of this was that it dulled them spiritually. It blinded them. They became like what they worshiped. Isaiah goes into greater detail to describe how deities were made in chapter 44. Engaging with these created things made them like them – powerless, senseless. Verse 3 says, “The ox knows its owner, the donkey (knows) its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” God says, A beast of burden knows to real deal, but not my people – they don’t even know me. They don’t even understand. “They went after false idols and became false” (2 Kings 17:15).

Idol Worship is a Strike Out

All of Israel was bowing down and serving idols and not following the one true God. They were serving idols that they made with their own two hands. They were worshiping things that they created because they had desires, they wanted fulfilled. Directly related to their replacing Yahweh in their hearts, they replaced his priorities with their own priorities. It seems like the poor, powerless, and outcasts lost protections when God’s people wandered away from their God. But they had longings they wanted answered. They wanted something from these make-believe gods. Something these phony gods promised was appealing to the people of Judah. They looked at these wooden sculptures, these statues they sanded and painted and kept in their pockets and they said to them, “Do something for me and I pledge my devotion to you!”

I may point at them and I may laugh at them and think - what was wrong with you Judah?! But I’m not so sure I’m any different than them. I’m not so sure that what was wrong with them isn’t also wrong in my heart. Actually, I’m sure what was wrong with their hearts is also wrong with me. And let me tell you why- I have never bowed down before an Asherah Pole, and I have never looked to Baal for ask to make it rain. But you know what?

My career was made by human hands.
My car was made by human hands.
My house was made by human hands.
My busy schedule was made by human hands.
My academic degrees were made by human hands.
My guitar was made by human hands.
My clothing and my “physique” was made by human hands.
My sports equipment was made by human hands.
My television and my computer were made by human hands.
My iPhone and apple watch were made by human hands.

There are so many ways in which I am prone to devote myself to these lesser things. These are good gifts from God, for sure, but not made to sit on the throne in my heart. And at any given moment these things whisper to my heart: *“I will fulfill the deepest longings of your heart. If you will just bow down and serve me. Only I can make you whole. Just chose me over giving to another human being. Just choose something over your wife. Just choose something over your children. Just choose your career, or your car, or your degree instead of whatever other better priorities God has set before you. Devote yourself to me, I will make you whole. Only I can make you whole. Only I can fix that broken ache in your heart. Only me. Only me. Nothing else. Only me.”*

And I fall for it more often than I care to admit. I may look upon something I have created with my own two hands, and I have presented this thing with what I want, and I have pledged my allegiance to this thing. I may look upon my degrees, or my library of books, or my witty sense of humor, or my taste in shoes- some thing I’ve made with my own two hands, and I looked this thing in the eye and I have said, *“If you will just give me status, or give me power, if you will just give me meaning and significance, if you would fulfill the deepest longings of my heart, I will bow down and worship you. I will pledge my allegiance to you. I will sacrifice my family - my wife, my child, upon your altar - if you will just fill the deepest longings of my heart, I will worship you!”* I’m not any different than the nation of Israel to the north, or Judah to the south. In fact, I’m sure that I’m just as prone to devote myself to idols for meaning and purpose as they were. They had forgotten who their God was and what he really required of them. Isaiah was calling them back to worship the one true God. Isaiah was calling them from frivolity, to a rightly ordered life. Isaiah was calling them to experience spiritual formation in the image of the God that made them. To have his priorities be their priorities.

In what ways are you prone to place your life, your marriage, your children into the

hands of an outstretched idol? In what ways have you forfeited God's priorities on your life and opted instead to trust in one of these things – these false gods to dictate your behavior?

When we worship God, we become more like God, more focused on his priorities – more captivated by his grandeur, more loving and focused on others, more aware at how to care for those in need. Don't be formed by things that can't deliver you, because you will end up senseless and fake. Be formed by the one true God and become more whole, more of who he designed you to be.

James Smith has written about Augustine's view of idolatry. I love the titles of his books, the first book of his I own is called You Are What You Love. And his most recent book is called, On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts. Augustine spoke a lot about the spiritual significance of what we love most is what we worship. And what we cherish and hold most dear is what we give the power to reshape us into its image. In his most recent book, he says, "Our idolatries are less like conscious decisions to believe a falsehood and more like learned dispositions to hope in what will disappoint."

How often is idolatry today trusting in God's good gifts first rather than looking to the God who gives them? I need to hear Isaiah today. I need to be reminded to worship the one true God because my heart is easily drawn to worship things I create with my own two hands. I can easily become blinded by these good gifts and look to them to fill me. I treat good things like they have the power to complete me, but they won't complete me or ease the ache in my heart, they will harm me, they will deform my heart if I let them consume me.

So, I ask you to consider again:

What good gifts are you looking towards for completeness today?

What good things are we trusting in that are not God, and are not able to satisfy?

Jesus: Our Game Winning Grand Slam

The presence of the prophets in Israel and Judah was the sign that the people were not behaving in a way that reflected the nature of Yahweh, the one God they were supposed to be representing on earth. But the presence of the prophets was also the sign that God was calling his people back into right relationship with him. The prophets were a sign of God's love and grace - calling them back to the covenant established at the foot of Sinai.

They were bound to this covenant, bound to bear the consequences for breaking the agreement. They were bound to pay the price for disobedience. They were not familiar with the terms and conditions before they clicked “I Agree” at the end of the covenant? When was the last time I read the fine print on my cell phone contract? But I’m still legally bound to abide by it. So, it is in my best interest to know what the contract says before I click “I agree.” God’s people may have understood at the foot of Sinai what they were agreeing to, but this people, the people in the book of Isaiah was not overly familiar or interested in reading the fine print on God’s law.

The tricky thing about this is that God was calling them back to a law, back to a covenant with *either/or* stipulations. The covenant was based on the premise “If you obey God, then God will bless you.” If you failed to do so, there would be punishment. And make no mistake about it, verse 20 basically promises there will be punishment and judgment upon injustice, idolatry, and all sin. But through this judgement there would be mercy and restoration. The invitation to return to God is extended throughout Isaiah.

Highlighted in verse 18 for us he says, "Come now, let us reason together, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." The people only needed to repent, tear down their idols, and seek the true God.

They do not ever completely meet the requirements of the Sinai Covenant - they never meet the totality of the law. Though their hands are covered in blood, and their sins are evident, the promise was that God would continue to engage with them and would clear the way to cleanse them from their blood red sins and make their hearts white as wool.

When Jesus enters history, he meets the requirements of the law given to Moses at Sinai. He doesn’t remove one requirement of that covenant that was given to them, but he meets them in full. He lived up to a standard we were and are completely unable to accomplish. But he takes the curses of the covenant upon himself when he is crucified. Cursed is he who hangs on a tree. Jesus bears the full weight of punishment that the covenant required, demanded, needed. And because he meets the full requirement of the covenant and bears the punishments, he gives to us the ability to enter into a new covenant. He establishes this new covenant not with the blood of a spotless lamb, but in *his* spotless blood. This new covenant says that his death and resurrection would be transferable to us by faith, and by belief in him. This new covenant says to us that belief in him would wash away our blood red sins and make us pure and clean like white wool. He establishes his covenant with us, not an either/or covenant – but a Covenant based

upon his works already done.

Jesus is the ultimate prophet in this way. He discloses what was known to God and declares it to the people. The nature of his purification was not fully clear to Isaiah at this point, but in various places New Testament authors pick up on the trail Isaiah weaves about the suffering servant bearing the weight of punishment for his people. Jesus restores something deeply broken inside of us by his Holy Spirit - when he gives us new life. He gives us the ability to love him above all the other things. He gives us the power to tear down what battles for attention in our hearts. What you love the most will shape you. God's power is at work inside of you to help you in this battle for the throne in your heart. The Holy Spirit gives us deeper insight as to what's going on inside of us - he gives us eyes to see and ears to hear and makes us aware of our own idolatries that may distract us from being captivated by his beauty. You can't fully follow the One true God and still keep trinkets enshrined in your heart. Repentance from idolatry means taking steps to tear them down those idols in your heart. For us, they are not statues of Baal and Asherah, but we experience idolatry as those good gifts from God that we put too much emphasis on in our lives. A good gift used in the wrong way. Ask the Holy Spirit to move inside you to reveal your idolatries and reorder your priorities. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you and tear down in your heart anything that stands in the way of your true delight in Christ Jesus alone. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to find your fullness, your hearts contentment in Jesus first. He is refashioning our desires in his own image as we worship him. He gives us the power to set apart Christ the Lord in our hearts (1 Peter 3:15). This work, this repentance is just preparation for the real season. This specifically Christian task of tearing down idols in our hearts is just spring training. Were preparing for the real season begins, where we see Jesus face to face. When we see him, I hope his infinite grandeur, beauty, and glory give us some perspective as we respond like Isaiah, "Woe is me, I'm a man of unclean lips!" (Isaiah 6:4-6)

By his grace he used Isaiah to speak to the willing and obedient (verse 6) to preserve his people and draw a map of salvation to the very moment when Jesus would enter history. Be willing to follow Jesus into hard places - both in this world he created and in your own heart. We too easily take good gifts and turn them into idols that don't satisfy us. Look to him to show you the ways that you're doing this, the way your heart is more satisfied with the gifts rather than the Giver. Be obedient to cast down those idols and trust that God is your ultimate reward. Know that this not a one-time event but is a continuous process. Martin Luther said in the first of his 95 Thesis he wrote which began the Reformation, "The entire life of the Christian is one of repentance." Trust that Jesus

is able to meet the deepest longings of your heart. So, recognize and take down those idols and set apart Christ as Lord. He will make your hearts white as wool.

Conclusion

There is so much to be gained from wading into the deep waters that Isaiah has for us. We've just covered the big picture of his message to God's people and the grand narrative of the Bible. God calls Isaiah to speak to a rebellious people. God's people have neglected to care for their neighbors and therefore neglected to be his true representatives to the nations. God's people have become like their idols, without sense and without reasoning. God uses Isaiah to speak to this wayward people, to warn them of the judgment to come. A very real wrath that Isaiah was warning his people about we see clearly demonstrated and absorbed by Jesus. Spiritual renewal comes through Isaiah's Suffering Servant. We know this is Jesus, who suffers on our behalf.

Jesus saves God's people from a life distorted, a life wrapped around idols and he frees us to worship him. He saves us from a self-focused and unjust life and frees us to be a light to all the nations. Isaiah sees this from a distance ahead, and we see Jesus in a much fuller light than Isaiah did. We can look upon Jesus and appreciate his work on our behalf. We can appreciate his work of Salvation in a way Isaiah did not see. Jesus has washed away our blood red sins and cleansed our hearts. He continues to change our lives by his Spirit dwelling inside us. He continues to help us recognize our disordered priorities and knock those idols off the throne in our hearts. The throne in our heart is his alone and the work we do today is just Spring Training for the day he will reign in our hearts fully. That's the season we look forward to. Jesus is the only person who can possess the throne in our hearts and not destroy us. He prepares us for the day we will see him sit down on the throne in Heaven. Maybe to us it will look as it looked to Isaiah when he saw God on the throne in heaven when he was called to ministry. And on that day we see Jesus on his throne in heaven may we join the heavenly choir singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3). May it be so in us and through us. Amen.

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Do you enjoy baseball? What's your favorite team? Why?
2. Have you ever taken a spiritual gifts assessment? Did it ever say you have the gift of prophecy? If not, which ones did you have?

Diving Into The Word

3. The remainder of Isaiah 1 (verses 21-31) is a difficult section to read because it is filled with God's judgment on sin. What symbolic language do you see that gives Judah hope through the trials of judgment?
4. Read through Isaiah 6. What do you notice about his experience of seeing God on his throne? How do you think seeing God on his throne effected his work in ministry?
5. Did you notice the call of the Angels in heaven matches the call of the Angels in the throne room that John reports in Revelation 4:7-9? Take a deeper look and discuss the differences between the two verses.
6. Isaiah 40:18-20 Describes idol worship from God's perspective. Does that give us any insight into our temptation to put something "made by hands" into that God shaped void in our hearts?

Taking It Home

7. Reflect on the quote from James K. A. Smith, "*Our idolatries are less like conscious decisions to believe a falsehood and more like learned dispositions to hope in what will disappoint.*"
8. What are things that you are disposed to placing at the center of your life? What might you do this week to recognize those "idols" and repent?