

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Saturday morning is laundry day at our house. I cannot take the credit for doing the laundry for us. Don does the laundry. I can't remember when he started doing it, but I'm sure it was sometime while I was still the Minister of Christian Nurture back at Westminster COB. I remember that when we bought our house in Westminster, I was very excited to have my own washer and dryer—I was doing the laundry then.

Before that, we lived in an apartment and we had to carry our laundry across a parking lot to get to the community's laundry room, and we had to plug the machines with quarters and dimes to make them run. So, when we moved to Westminster, I was thrilled to not need change to plug the machines, nor did I need run across the parking lot to the laundry room in bad weather. Don decided on his own to begin doing the laundry on Saturday mornings. He would let me sleep-in, which he still does, and he began doing the laundry, I'm sure, so we would have more time to do something together.

I continue to wash my delicates because I don't usually have a full load on a Saturday morning and because they are more of a pain to do, you know, deciding which can go in the dryer and which need to get hung to dry, stuff like that. He could certainly do those too. Anyhow, the first task of washing the clothes in our house is sorting them by whites, light colors and darks, so the whites hopefully don't get gray, and by textures of materials so that lighter materials don't get ruined by over drying them.

I learned a valuable lesson the hard way one time when I inadvertently washed a favorite white sweater with something that was red. The sweater unfortunately came out of the washer pink. I was very angry with myself. I tried washing it again, but the pink would not go away. So, I didn't wear the sweater for a long time. Like I said, it was a favorite and so eventually I dug it out again, tried a variety of tricks to try and get the pink out, all of which failed until I soaked it in bleach, with some anxiety that it might fall apart. It didn't. The pink is gone, and so, I do wear it now.

I remember reading something years ago, that people were working on an effort to produce self-cleaning clothes. I believe it was some Chinese engineers. I googled "self-cleaning" clothes to see if that effort had been accomplished. All that I was able to find in my brief efforts of the search is that it is still a work in progress.

What I discovered is that self-cleaning clothes, however, would not be a good excuse for laziness. A little effort would still be required for the cleaning process to be successful. One couldn't just rip off their clothes and throw them on a pile. You would still need to, at the very least, both hang them and rinse them, which is, strangely, similar to God's demands of Israel in Isaiah. He called for the people to change, but to be restored -- to be washed clean -- they were going to need to do some work.

As we begin our exploration into the message that today's scripture reading has for us, it's helpful for us to know a little something about Isaiah and who he was addressing. The opening verse of the book of Isaiah tells us this about him: "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."

We learn here that Isaiah was a prophet, called by God to pass along God's message to the nation of Judah. He lived during the time when Israel had been divided into two kingdoms:

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Israel was the northern kingdom and Judah was the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom had already made a mess of things for themselves because they turned away from God.

Isaiah likely saw the writing on the wall for the southern kingdom because they were starting to head in the same direction. Like the sins of the northern kingdom, they were beginning to worship idols, perverting justice, oppressing the poor and looking for military aid from pagan nations **instead** of turning to God for guidance and help.

Although we could assume that Isaiah saw the writing on the wall, we find that what happened was more than that; he in fact, had a vision. That's important to note, even before we actually get into the actual prophecies, of which there are many, he shared with the people of that day. Biblical Commentator William Barclay explains, the use of the word, "vision" tells that the words of the prophet "go beyond the immediate historical circumstances of his day."

That means that this vision is for us as a warning, kind of like the saying, "if the shoe fits, wear it." We are invited to listen, and learn from the mistakes of the people of his day. Overall, his message was and is a call for repentance, turning from sin and turning back to God.

Before Isaiah gets into the actual prophecy he needs to share, he reminds the people of the destruction that came upon the people of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. He wanted them to remember, God's willingness to spare Sodom and Gomorrah of destruction if faithful people could be found, and God in fact, did spare a small handful of faithful people.

This reminder made the point, that though the people he was speaking to were disobedient to God, it wasn't too late for them to turn from their sin. But, if the people really wanted to hear God through the words of the prophet, they were going to need to listen closely **and** be obedient.

If you have or have had a pet at one time, you know what it is like to try to train your pet to be obedient to your commands. Don and I are convinced that our cat Marvin and our dog Royce have selective hearing. We've had them for more than ten years and they know the meaning of the commands we say. It's not like the first time they ever heard them. And yet, sometimes they look at us as if to say, "I don't want to," or "I'll get back to you later."

That's selective hearing, which is the same thing, admittedly, even the most faithful Christians do this to God. Isaiah warns us not to have selective hearing. Listen to his warning, otherwise the results may be devastating if we don't.

Having laid this groundwork, Isaiah went on to communicate to the people on God's behalf that God was not happy with their worship and their sacrifices. God was not unhappy with the actual practice of offering sacrifices to him, but their sacrifices became meaningless. They offered sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin, but the meaning was nothing more than the killing and shedding of the blood of animals. God knew the people really were not sorry for their disobedience and lack of faith.

The sacrifices they offered were supposed to be an outward sign of their inward faith in God, but that clearly was not the case. The evidence of this reality was found in the manner of their living. Their worship was nothing more than improper laundering of their clothes, which when they put them on again, were still obviously dirty.

Isaiah was and is calling for repentance. The gap between worship and life between Sunday and the rest of the week, is what the prophet is attacking. It's not just about what we do on Sunday, but also what we do the rest of the week.

Repentance requires obedience to God. One interesting thing about the prophet's message calling for obedience is that he is not calling for adherence to the Ten Commandments, but

instead: “to seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless and plead for the widows.” Quite honestly, these are the same callings of obedience we hear from the other prophets.

We read in Hosea 12:6, that the prophet says there, “But as for you, return to your God; hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.”

We read in Amos 5:24 that the prophet Amos instructs us: to “But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

We read that the prophet Micah says in 6:8 of his book: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

The prophets did not say to us that following the 10 commandments is all we need to do to be right with God—that simply is not enough; but they demanded justice, kindness, humility from us, all of which are extensions of the commandments. They are greater values **demanding something from our hearts**.

There simply isn’t room in our hearts for both sinfulness and God. Jesus teaches us that when he taught us to love God, and only God, first and foremost with our whole hearts, with everything that makes us who we are; and to love our neighbors, even our enemies, as we love ourselves. If we repent of our sinful ways, getting that trash out of our hearts, and get ourselves in-sync with these commandments, the other values that the prophets call us to attend to will be a part of our efforts in obedience to God.

As we all know, none of us is perfect, and try as we may to wash ourselves clean of sin, we mess up again and again. It may feel pointless to try. But the prophet tells us the loving words of God that can save us, “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson they will be like wool.”

Scarlet and crimson were the colors of a deep permanent dye, and its deep stain was virtually impossible to remove from clothing. The stain of sin seems equally permanent, but God can remove sin’s stain from our lives just as he promised to do for the Israelites.

We know more about that than the people of Isaiah’s day, don’t we? We have the Good News of Jesus Christ, who paid the price as the final sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sin. When we genuinely confess and repent of our sin, we are forgiven.

Although we may find it hard to believe because we may feel terrible about some of the things we’ve done, we can be assured God has forgiven us. Therefore, we should forgive ourselves, learn from our mistakes, and move forward in the newness of life that God gives us, living up to the higher values the prophets call to our attention.

In *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World*, Ron Lee Davis retells the true story of a priest in the Philippines, a much-loved man of God who carried the burden of a secret sin he had committed many years before. He had repented but still had no peace, no sense of God’s forgiveness.

In his parish was a woman who deeply loved God and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ and he with her. The priest, however, was skeptical. To test her he said, “The next time you speak with Christ, I want you to ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary.” The woman agreed. A few days later the priest asked, “Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?”

“Yes, he did,” she replied.

“And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what did he say?”

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"He said, 'I don't remember'"

What God forgives, He forgets.

Isaiah tells us that it is not too late for us to make things right with God and be set free from our sin. If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist; If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

There's no denying that we've all got dirty laundry to clean-up. We know what needs to be done to make it clean, beginning with our worship, here and now. And as the stain of our sin comes out in the wash, we surely will become instruments to bring about justice, kindness and humility. For the prophets sent by God, declare the warning and the need for a response from us, announcing also that those who sincerely love the Lord and respond with obedience will be rewarded. Amen.