

Sermon: The Case Against Judah... and Us Is. 1:1-31

This morning our sermon is on Isaiah 1.
We are studying Isaiah this Advent season because it helps us appreciate the significance of Christ's coming.

For many of us, Advent season is that time when we look forward to Christmas.
It's a waiting time, filled with anticipation.
And so, during advent, we decorate the house, we put up lights, we play Christmas music, we purchase gifts and get into the holiday spirit.
Yet we should be aware that spiritually, the season of Advent was intended to be decidedly darker.
It is a time filled with hope and anticipation to be sure. But that hope and anticipation are to come from a place of mourning and sadness.

The best Advent hymns are the saddest one.
And it's a poverty that we don't have more sad Advent music.

Advent is a Latin word that means "Arrival" or "Coming." During Advent season, the church looks back **and** looks forward.
First we look back- in that we remember the time before Christ came.
We seek to understand the minds and perspectives of those who longed for the Messiah.
And, because we know that the Messiah has come, **we look forward** to his second Advent, his second coming.
So, in a sense, we are united with the the Old Testament people of God.
They looked forward in hope to the Messiah's first coming.
And we look forward to his second coming.

There is no denying that the age we live in is better than the age the Old testament people of God lived in.
They didn't know exactly when or how the Christ would come.
But we do.
Yet just because we know that Christ has come does not mean that we rightly appreciate him.

To rightly appreciate Christ, we have to understand the sufferings and sadness of the Old Testament people of God.

Imagine you are invited to go to a friend's house to watch a Soccer game.
Imagine it's a Championship Game and the German national team is playing some nation that cheats all the time and nobody likes.
So everyone in attendance is rooting for the German team.
And no, It's not during a time of pandemic and so the house is going to be filled with guests all crowded around the TV screen.
Now, because of a prior engagement, you are not able to come to the party on time.
As a matter of fact, you are only able to see the last 5 minutes of the game.

So, you walk in and begin watching with 5 minutes of stoppage time remaining.
The score is 0 to 0.

Then 4 minutes after you arrive, in the last seconds of stoppage time, Germany scores the goal that puts them ahead.

The referee blows the whistle, the game is over and Germany wins.
Everybody celebrates.

Yet you notice something interesting- the people that had been watching the game the longest and most intently are the ones who celebrate the most.
Their joy in victory is greater than yours because they have been through an emotional workout.

If our understanding of Advent is limited to the texts in Luke or Matthew that tell us about the time before Christ's birth, then we are just catching the last 5 minutes of the game.

Yet if we read Isaiah in light of Christ's Advent, well then we are catching the game just as the team comes back out on the field after the half-time break.

Isaiah chapter 1 places us at half-time in the history of God's Old Testament people.

Now, much has happened in the first half.
Abraham has become the father of the faith.
Israel has been formed into a nation.
Moses has led the people out of Egypt.
The law has been given.
The period of the judges is past.
The monarchy has been established.
And the kingdom of Israel has been split between the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah.

And in this time, after the split of the kingdom but before the overthrow and exile, Isaiah was a prophet.
It's halftime in Israel's history.

Isaiah 1:1 says:

Isaiah 1:1 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.

Isaiah began his ministry during a dark time when things were getting darker all the time.
He was a prophet for over 50 years in the southern kingdom of Judah.
His calling was to tell the people of Judah about their sin, God's coming judgment, and God's final grace.

The first 39 Chapters of Isaiah look forward to Jerusalem's coming destruction and Judah's coming exile.
Now, Isaiah was first called to be a prophet in 740 BC.
For reference: The northern kingdom of Israel fell in 722 BC and the southern kingdom would fall in 587 BC.
Isaiah never lived to see the downfall of Judah which was the kingdom to whom he was called to prophesy.
Yet his prophecies said much about their coming destruction.

Isaiah's perspective on Judah's future is one of dark skies that will become darker still.
He has to tell the people that things are going to get much worse before they get better.
In the end, God's grace will prevail but not before many terrible events.

And this perspective of things going from dark to darker helps us understand the minds of God's people as they looked forward to Christ's first Advent. Gone are the happy thoughts and sentimentality of Advent. In Isaiah, there is only a distant future hope for rescue and restoration.

Judah has so many problems and dysfunctions. Idolatry continues unabated. The poor are oppressed. The weak are exploited. People are just out for themselves and they have little love for God or neighbor.

And what is worse, no one seems to see their need for repentance. It's as though God has been entirely forgotten in Judah. His law has been abandoned. His promises cast aside, his threatenings ignored and his salvation disregarded.

So, as we study Isaiah 1, let us prepare ourselves for harsh words about Judah's terrible condition. In Isaiah Chapter 1, God is disgusted because of Judah's sinfulness. Yet in this disgust, there is grace. Because God never stops intruding on the people of Judah. Long before Isaiah prophesied, God made a covenant with Judah's own King David that David's throne would be established forever.

This covenant shows us the great depths of God's grace. Because Judah went to the greatest lengths of unfaithfulness and still, God doesn't abandon Judah. And so as we study Isaiah 1, let us seek to get a sense of the contours of God's disgust, grief and grace.

Now, because chapter one is so long, we will read and study it as we go.

You have a sermon outline and the first point there is:

I. The Price of Forgetting God (1-9)

After Isaiah introduces himself in verse one, he calls heaven and earth as witnesses to Israel's rebellion. God is making a legal case against his people, as if in a courtroom. And while the phrasing of his case is poetic and beautiful, it reveals to us God's grieving heart.

He writes:

Isaiah 1:2 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."

Israel has forgotten God. Notice the God's ridicule barely beneath the surface of these verses.

Oxen know their owners.

Donkeys know their master's crib.

But Israel, the people whom God has rescued time and time again,

The people He's provided for, protected and made promises to, this Israel has forgotten God.

How could they do such a thing?

It's so unreasonable.

And so there is a scathing rebuke here.

God is telling his people: "You are dumber than farm animals."

In verses 4-6, God heaps on the invectives: The people are not simply sinful. They are laden, that is weighed down with sin. At the end of verse four, we have a summary of their extreme state.

They are utterly estranged.

This means they have cut themselves off from God.

It's as if they never knew God.

In verse 5, God questions their lack of wisdom because their rebellion just makes no sense.

He says: "**Why will you be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel?**"

This shows the irrationality of forgetting God. It's not in their best interest.

They were called to be a people who loved the Lord their God with all their heart, soul mind and strength.

Yet as they stand under God's judgment, they are abused and broken.

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.

This is the picture, not of a beloved son being care for by his father, but rather of an abused slave.

Israel's sin will enslave them and leave them bleeding and falling apart.

Isaiah is speaking prophetically here. He's foretelling their future.

Yet the sufferings of their sin will not just be felt in their bodies.

It will also be experienced throughout their land as they are overrun.

Now it's important to note that this first chapter is not in chronological order.

It's a thematic introduction- not a chronological one.

And so, while Judah's destruction is still over 100 years away, the prophet is warning them before any of it happens.

In verses 7-9, he tells of what will become of their lands:

Isaiah 1:7 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.

And so there is a picture for them of a wasteland.

Their beautiful cities will be levelled.

They will be isolated and utterly alone, like a shack out in the middle of a farmers field.

And then in verse 9, God goes there.
He goes to the place that is as threatening and ridiculing as can be.
He compares Zion to the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Isaiah 1:9 If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

These are harsh words.
God compares his people to arguably the most evil people who have ever lived.

How did Israel get to this place where they are being compared to Sodom and Gomorrah?
They forgot God.
They ignored him.
And in ignoring him, they've become insensible to him.

In Matthew 11:20, Jesus denounced the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.
And listen to whom he compares them:
Matthew 11:23 And you, Capernaum (Jesus lived in Capernaum for some time), will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. **24** But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

Jesus is speaking the same way Isaiah spoke 700 years earlier,
He's grieved because the people of God are so insensible to him.
Therefore he compares them to Sodom.

And this is where Israel is.
This is the price of forgetting God.

In verses 10-17, God reveals Israel's corrupt worship.
And this brings us to our next point:

II. Corrupted Worship (10-20)

Israel's worship is not corrupt because they lack heart or because they fail to carry out the forms of worship appropriately.

Their worship is corrupt because they lack integrity.
Their personal lives are so full of sin that God literally hates their worship.

In verses 10-15, God's disgust is palpable.

Isaiah 1:10 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.
Isaiah 1:12 "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;

And Why? Why will God not listen?
The answer is there at the end of verse 15.
Because... **your hands are full of blood.**

Now they might ask: How are our hands full of blood?
And the Lord would point them to the community around them- especially the poor and the weak.
These are the people they have allowed to be oppressed and exploited.
God has a special heart for the weak.
And when his people take no notice of the plight of the poor, God hates it.

In James 1:27, James writes:
27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

God would have his people give special attention to the poor and the weak.
We see this also in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31.
In this parable, the way the Lord tells his people apart from those who are not his, is by what they did and did not do.

Especially in how they treated the poor and needy.
In that parable there are people in various states of need- one hungry, one thirsty, a stranger, one poorly clothed, one sick and one in prison.

And the Lord said: "In as much as you have served the least of these, you have done it unto me."
But inasmuch as you have not served the least of these, you have not served me."
The Lord identifies especially closely with the poor.
And he is especially displeased when the poor and weak are ignored or exploited.

Israel's worship was corrupt because their society was especially unjust.
They crushed the poor, or they sat idly by and watched the poor being crushed.
And so in verses 16-20, God calls his people to repentance for their mistreatment of the poor.

He says:
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.
Isaiah 1:18 "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."

Now at this point, we just have to pause and ask ourselves the question: Why does God care so much for this people of Israel?
Why are they warned so explicitly is why is God so interested in their repentance?

It's because God has set His love on this people. He has raised them up to be a people that he will work through for his own glory. You see, it's not that Israel loved God and was such a standout nation that drew God's attention to them. Rather, it's that God loved them and set his affection on them.

And this sort of gracious love is fulfilled in Christ. John, who was fully Jewish but ministered to Gentiles wrote the following:
1 John 4:10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

And so Israel is an early example of God setting his love on a people and bearing with them. Not because Israel loved him but because he loved Israel.

And this love of God leads us to our final point:
III. Heartbreaking Infidelity (21-31)

In verses 21-31, we read more about God's grief and disappointment at Israel's faithlessness. Of all of the words and images the Lord uses in scripture to describe his people's sin, there is one that cuts the deepest. And that is the image of spiritual adultery.

One of the preachers that I frequently listen to tells the story of how he and his wife have been watching the tv series "The Crown."
And as the series chronicles the life of Charles and Diana of England, one sad theme ran throughout their marriage. And that was the theme of Charles's continual adultery. He had everything. He was heir to the throne, he had a beautiful wife and two healthy children. Yet he was continually unfaithful.

There is something especially heartbreaking and destructive about adultery. And in Isaiah 1:21, the Lord likens his people to an adulterous spouse. He says:

Isaiah 1:21 How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. **22** Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. **23** Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them.

The Lord is clearly heartbroken and angry with his bride's repeated infidelities. And so in verses 24-31, the Lord promises redemption for those who turn and repent. But for those who continue in that adultery, he promises judgment.

Isaiah 1:24 Therefore the Lord declares, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes. **25** I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. **26** And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city."
Isaiah 1:27 Zion shall be redeemed by justice,

and those in her who repent, by righteousness. **28** But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed. **29** For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired; and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. **30** For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water. **31** And the strong shall become tinder, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them.

Now you might be thinking, I came to church this morning to be encouraged in my faith. To draw closer to God. Yet, here in Isaiah 1, all I'm getting is God's disappointment with me. What is the point of all of this? And what does this have to do with Advent?"

Well, we have to remember that Jesus came to be our savior. And Isaiah 1 shows us what we are saved from. If we have a small view of our sin then we will have a small need of a savior.

But when we read Isaiah, we learn how God really feels about our sin. It breaks his heart. It grieves Him deeply. It angers him.

And Christ came to be the savior who would bear our sins. He was treated as one who grieved God. As one who committed spiritual adultery and bowed down to idols. Jesus was treated like one who loved the world and not God.

In short, he was treated like he was one of us. And all of the anger of God that was due to us was placed upon him.

Isaiah 53:5-6 says:
5 he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Advent is a time not of lights and celebration but a time to be reminded of our darkness and the penalty our sins deserve. Advent is a season of repentance. And as we are repentant, we are made ready to receive Christ.

I love how one Anglican teacher put it: "Advent begins in darkness. And Christmas is meant to burst upon us in light."

So be honest with yourself before God. Renew your repentance before him. Be comprehensive about it. Take your time in doing so, examining your heart. Looking at how you spend the time God has given you and the money he has entrusted you with. Advent is a season of repentance. And as we repent of our darkness, we are made ready to receive Christ who is the light of the world.

Amen.