

**“The Difference Worship Makes”**  
**Rev. David J. Wood**  
**August 10, 2025**

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20. (also Luke 12: 32-40)

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.

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!  
Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!  
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.  
When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your  
hand? Trample my courts no more!

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

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds  
from before my eyes; cease to do evil;  
learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed;  
defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord:  
If your sins are like scarlet, will they become like snow?  
If they are red like crimson, will they become like wool?  
If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land,  
but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

~~~~~

When I look back on some of the darkest times in the history of the 20th Century, I cannot help but become preoccupied with the question of how the church could have been so oblivious to what was happening in their midst; how could people gather week in and week out for worship and fail to be moved to act, to resist in ways that would have changed the conditions of the world around them?

I remember visiting Warsaw, Poland several years ago for a conference and taking the train to the Memorial at the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. It's estimated that over one million Jews and at least another 100,000 prisoners were murdered there. It was a sober, gut-wrenching visit.

I remember standing outside the camp, surveying that ominous tower you've seen in so many pictures of the camp. As haunting as the tower was, I was struck by the awareness of the several train tracks that fed into the camp under that infamous tower. The tracks ran across the yards in front of ordinary houses and their driveways. Perhaps they weren't there in the 1930's and 40's. But there was every evidence the homes had been there for some time. In 1940 Christians comprised 70% of the total population in Poland.

Then there's the question of German Christians. In Germany, in the 1930's and 40's, 95% of the total population identified as Christian making it one of the most churched countries in Europe – and yet there, in those neighborhoods of all those churches and professing Christians, a massive and abominable and unspeakable injustice was perpetrated on their Jewish neighbors.

Closer to home, I remember watching the films from the 1960's of young, black, elementary aged children making their way to their new school. The school had been desegregated by Federal Order. The young students, accompanied by National Guardsman had to walk through a phalanx of angry and hostile white parents who considered those children to be utterly unfit to attend school with their children...

It is more than reasonable to assume, that many of those parents were active members of local congregations...and there was no sign of a counter protest from church members who felt otherwise.

How can churches and the people who inhabit them fail so profoundly to live out their calling to love God with all their heart soul mind and strength and their neighbors as themselves?

I know I'm not even scratching the surface of how churches were either actively or silently complicit in injustice over the course 20th Century...in the years before and after.

Well, apparently, this is an enduring problem that has plagued the people of God, worshippers of God well before the 20th Century. Consider our reading from Isaiah. Assuming that the Prophet Isaiah was writing in the eighth Century before Christ, some 2800 years ago, we have evidence that the failure of the people of God to do what was required of them in the world they were living has been a longstanding problem.

The words of our text are strong...harsh,..even hostile. In Isaiah's day, God is not just baffled, God is furious!

The purpose of Worship is to prepare us to live in the world... to be nothing less than signs of God's presence in time and history. And just what that work is and what it looks like is pretty straight forward, It's not a mystery. It doesn't require advanced degrees or secret knowledge...

Cease to do evil...  
learn to do good  
seek justice;

If that's not specific enough...God gets more concrete:

rescue the oppressed  
defend the orphan  
plead for the widow

That's it. Tend to those whom society dismisses,  
disregards, casts aside, and abandons by the wayside.  
See them, take up their cause, do not let them be trampled underfoot.

When we who gather to worship God fail to do these things, to be present in these ways the validity of what we do here is not just diminished – it is corrupted and corrupting.

That does not diminish the importance of what we do here...for what we do here, if we do it well, is how we are strengthened and prepared to be present in and for the world.

It is here we are supposed to become attuned to what matters,  
to what and for who our lives are to be lived for.

When thinking about living out our faith beyond these walls, I feel compelled to say a word about politics...and how politics is an inevitable and necessary dimension of calling.

How we act toward / in relation to our neighbor in the larger society is necessarily partly determined by politics...politics mediates social norms & policies into our common life

Politics directly impacts the implementation of justice or, conversely, the enactment of injustice.

For too many of us who are Christians,  
the important doctrine of the Separation of Church and State  
has been interpreted as the separation of Worship from daily life.

As we see from Isaiah, from God's point of view:  
there is *no wall of separation* between our worship and our way of being in the world.

There is a distinction but not a disconnect between our faith and our politics...  
It is normal for there to be an imperfect alignment...between our faith and our politics...  
What must be avoided, however, and wherever possible is an outright misalignment..

For example...as Christians we be able to stand as one in our opposition to...

a POLITICS of revenge,  
a POLITICS of retribution or  
a POLITICS of resentment or  
a POLITICS of fear

Any such politics and the policies and actions that result from such a politics calls for our opposition...not because of our politics but because of our calling...our calling to be faithful worshippers of God.

Politics matters to God...because God is one who acts IN history.

We are a people called to embody  
a politics of grace,  
a politics of nonviolence,  
a politics of generosity,  
a politics of compassion,  
and, above all, a politics of love.

We live in a challenging time...

A time in which those lawfully seeking refuge are cast aside, abducted and thrown into prison...

A time in which being people of peace is regarded as naive and impossible...

A time when basic human rights are being revoked....

A time in which there is a growing assumption that that we simply cannot afford to care for those in need...

If we are to be faithful worshippers of God, we must find reasons beyond the dominant politics of our time to know who we are and what we must do.

Did you notice in our reading today that after all the harsh words God speaks through Isaiah, there is this welcome invitation...

"Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord."

There is another translation of that phrase that I prefer:

"Come now, let us REASON together..."

In worship find a way of reasoning that draws into a politics of grace, of generosity, of hope, and of love.

I see signs of that kind of politics around here...among you.

I am just learning about The Shields Fund...started in 2002. At that time, a member had bequeathed a large financial gift to the congregation. From that gift, the congregation chose to designate a sizable portion to be given away. That \$500,000 established the Shields Fund.

That fund is used to meet the needs of children, single mothers, and struggling families...needs that would otherwise go unmet. The Director of the Fund, Jeanne Denny, works with social workers to distribute those funds to those in need.

Over the past 23 years, the Fund has distributed more than \$1,000,000 in financial assistance. Today, the fund has only a \$70,000 balance and as it continues its work in coordination with Heavenly Threads (a thrift shop) and SOS (a clothing bank).

One of the ways we are seeking to be a people of grace and generosity..

I want to conclude with a story that is a reminder of how the church has not always failed to be faithful...it is the story of the community of Le Chambon in southern France.

The village of Le Chambon became known for its shelter and rescue of more than 2,500 Jews during the Nazi occupation of France.

A Jewish academic, Philip Hailie, had heard of this village and its remarkable witness and decided to go to Le Chambon so that he could tell the story of this goodness which he did in his book, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*.

At the center of the village was a church, led by pastor André Trocmé. Philip Hailie writes that Trocmé's commitment to non-violence was grounded in his relationship with Jesus, that "Jesus was for Trocmé the embodied forgiveness of sins, and staying close to Jesus meant always being ready to forgive your enemies...Trocmé could not bear to separate himself from Jesus by ignoring the precious quality of human life that God had demonstrated in the incarnation."

As Magda Trocmé said in an interview many years later, "How can you call us good? We were doing what had to be done. Who else could help them? And what has all this to do with goodness? Things had to be done, that's all and we happened to be there to do them."

One of the residents of Le Chambon remarked, "We did what we did not because of what we believed but because of who we are."

And yet, I would add, it is also true that they became who they were because of what they believed.

In the end, the best and only explanation Hailie could come up with as to why this community did what countless other communities failed to do was centered in what happened in the little church in the center of the village.

The church whose life and reason was engraved in three simple words above the entrance::

"Love one another."

I began this sermon by looking back to earlier, dark times and asking, "Where was the church?"

A more difficult and challenging question is how will others in future times, look back on this time, on us: will they see communities of faith who stood strong and fast, and bore witness to a different way of being in the world?

When Jesus was preparing his disciples for what lay ahead of them...dark times to be sure. Here is what he said:

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Let it be so among us for the sake of the world. Amen.