Words of encouragement week of June 20, 2022

June 20

Happy Monday, everyone.

Continuing with our look at the books of the Bible in order, today we begin a journey through the remaining books of the Old Testament, which are the prophets. There are four so-called “major” prophets and twelve so-called “minor” prophets. The terms major and minor are not used to describe their relative importance, but rather the length of their writings.

The first of the major prophets is Isaiah, who is perhaps the best-known of the prophets. (Editorial note: there are many more than these sixteen prophets who are mentioned in the Bible, such as Moses, Elijah, Nathan, and so on. These twelve are the ones whose writings compose part of the Old Testament.)

Since Isaiah is a long and complex book, we will take two weeks to review it. While much has been written regarding its authorship, the time period in which it was written, and related topics, for our purposes, we will not focus on any of that. Instead, we will focus on the actual messages found in this book and their application for today.

In order to read Isaiah properly, however, it is important to understand the historical context in which it was written. Following the reign of King Solomon, who was the third king of Israel, the nation became divided into the northern kingdom, called Israel, and the southern kingdom, called Judah. Because of both nations’ ongoing and grievous sin, God caused the northern kingdom to be overtaken by the Assyrians in 722 BC and the southern kingdom by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The Jewish kings were captured, the temple destroyed, and the people were sent into exile. Isaiah’s ministry spans from 740 BC to his death in 681 BC, which was prior to, during, and after the attack of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians. The first 39 chapters contain the Lord’s condemnation, spoken though Isaiah, of both nations, while the final 27 chapters contain messages of hope, including prophecy of the Messiah. OK, let’s jump in.

Isaiah starts with warnings to Judah:

“The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?” says the Lord.
“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me” (1:11-13).

Despite their ongoing sin, which included idolatry, sexual immorality, and social injustice, the people of Judah continued to make sacrifices and offerings to the Lord. However, as we have seen so often, God has no interest in false piety. He says that in the face of their disobedience, such offerings have “no meaning” and are “detestable.”

That may sound harsh, so what do we take from this? The greatest gift we can give our Creator is not our money, not our time, and not our service. The greatest gift we can give Him is our sincere and contrite hearts where, as we will see later, God says through the prophet Jeremiah, is the place where the new covenant, bought with the blood of His Son, is written.

IHS,
Pastor Lou
Greetings to you this day.

One of the beautiful things about Scripture is that it is one of the ways God reveals Himself to us (as He also does through Creation and through His Son). From that we can understand that to a limited, human extent, God desires that we know Him. He desires that we understand His will for our lives. He desires that we understand His heart and His character.

To that end, God graciously lets us know exactly what He is about and, consequently, what we should be about. As we read God’s self-revelation through Scripture, it becomes clear that God is a God of justice. God’s justice and righteousness go hand-in-hand. We read of it many times in Scripture, and one of the principal sources of God’s displeasure is injustice, particularly when it comes to the poor:

Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

See how the faithful city
has become a prostitute!
She once was full of justice;
righteousness used to dwell in her—
but now murderers!

Your rulers are rebels,
partners with thieves;
they all love bribes
and chase after gifts.
They do not defend the cause of the fatherless;
the widow’s case does not come before them.

What do you mean by crushing my people
and grinding the faces of the poor?”
declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty (Isaiah 1:17; 1:21-23; 3:15).

God holds the poor in high regard. Not because there is anything necessarily holy or righteous about being poor, but because often, it is the poor and the oppressed who are the first to turn to Him. Notice also here that calls us to action: “Learn to do right, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless…” In other words, simply doing nothing is not acceptable to the Lord.
The good news is this: God tells us exactly what He expects. He leaves nothing unanswered.

As always, I am so very thankful to be serving the Lord in a church that joins our Lord in the cause of justice and righteousness in His name’s sake.

IHS,
Pastor Lou

June 22

Grace and peace to you this day.

Continuing today with the book of Isaiah.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist (11:1-5).

Old Testament prophecy can sometimes be understood in a dual manner: both in a present context and in a future context. Here, “Jesse” is King David’s father. The Lord is saying that even though the Assyrians have cut down the royal line to a “stump,” nonetheless, from its roots “a Branch will bear fruit” and “the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him.”

While written within the context of the Assyrian conquest, the Lord is speaking of the coming of the Messiah, even though the Jewish people (and the world) would have to wait seven hundred years.
As we’ve said before, God has no problem letting His people wait. The good news for us is that the wait is over, at least for the first arrival of God’s Son. We know how the story ends, and our salvation is guaranteed.

But yet, somewhat like the Jews of Isaiah’s day, we also wait…for that glorious day when Christ returns

IHS,
Pastor Lou

June 23
Greetings to you with Shalom, the peace of Jesus.

Starting with chapter 12 and concluding with chapter 39, Isaiah contains oracles or prophecies against the nations. This includes not only Israel and Judah, but Assyria, Egypt, and other surrounding nations. Towards the end of chapter 28, we read this:

The Lord will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim, he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon—
   to do his work, his strange work,
   and perform his task, his alien task (28:11).

The events on the first two lines would have been familiar to Isaiah’s Jewish audience, as would events such as the battles of Lexington and Concord be to an American audience. Mount Perazim is where God delivered the Philistines into King David’s hands in battle, and the valley of Gibeon is where he fought at Joshua’s side. But what is meant by His “strange work” and “alien task?”

To understand this, understand, as we have said before, that one of the primary characteristics of God is justice. Also understand that God describes Himself to Moses like this: “‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34:6).

In saying that the Lord will “rise up” against Israel and describing it as His “strange work” and an “alien task,” the Lord is saying through Isaiah that “rising up” against His people is far from His first choice. God time and time again extended grace, compassion, and love to His people, who responded by turning away from Him. Therefore, God uses a manner that is “strange” and “alien” to Him in order to exact correction and discipline upon His beloved people.

However, as always, God is a God of hope and redemption. Next week, we turn from prophecies of doom to prophecies of hope.
IHS,
Pastor Lou

June 24

Happy Friday, everyone. Here’s your musical devotional for the week. Turn up the volume and enjoy.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9HcsERoxm8

IHS,
Pastor Lou