

12.12.21 Advent 3 Love for Those Who Need it Most Isaiah 1.11-20
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Proverbs 27.6 says, *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.”* That means you should be grateful for friends who care enough to correct you out of love and concern. In the Bible, there is a group of people who are called to the difficult task of speaking hard words of truth out of love and concern for God’s people, to confront them and to try and save them from disobedient ways of living that lead to disaster and death. These individuals are called prophets.

In our journey through the 66 books of the Bible, today we’re beginning a new part of the Hebrew Bible – the Prophets. The Prophets represent a special part of the Bible. Prophets have a difficult job. **They’re inspired and called by God to tell the people, including the powerful, what they don’t want to hear.** They implore everyone who hears their words to act on what they don’t want to hear before it’s too late. It’s amazing we have the words of the prophets because all of them were minority voices in their time, trying to persuade and convince people to change their ways and return to God and God’s will for love, compassion, justice, and peace. They spoke God’s truth to political and religious leaders as well as to ordinary people.

If you’ve listened to me preach for any length of time you know that I stress the love, grace, mercy, and goodness of God. Without those, we’re all lost. While we’re thankful for those aspects of God’s character, there are also times when God gets angry **because** God is loving, gracious, good, and merciful and people aren’t being treated in loving, merciful, and just ways. One of those times is in the first chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah was from Jerusalem and was married to a woman he called the prophetess (Isaiah 8:3). They had at least two sons. Isaiah means *“salvation of God”* or *“God is salvation.”* That’s a good thing to remember since most of the first 33 chapters of Isaiah are filled with words of judgment and condemnation against the people of Jerusalem, Judah, and other nations because of their lack of justice. The book of Isaiah begins with God speaking about the shallowness of the faith of so many people and the unethical, violent behavior that is ruining so many lives and devastating the nation. God

is fed up with religious services and sacrifices that are done without any change in the ethical behavior of the people and the lack of love for those who need it most.

Isaiah 1:11-20, “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 the evil of your doings 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: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall 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.**”

Our Advent theme is Love is the Gift of Christmas. **Justice is what love looks like in practice.** Today’s scripture from the prophet Isaiah talks about some specific ways God’s people can put love in action. In verse 17, God says through the prophet, **“cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”** It’s as important for God’s people today to engage in all of those actions as it was in Isaiah's time; to **come alongside those who need love the most** – those who are suffering injustice or oppression, to defend the orphan, to comfort and aid the grief stricken, to help those who are struggling or hurting for any reason. Brian Zahnd noted in an article titled, *My Problem with the Bible* “One of the most remarkable things about the Bible is that in it we find the narrative told from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved, the conquered, the occupied, the

defeated. **This is what makes it prophetic.** We know that history is written by the winners. This is true — except in the case of the Bible it's the opposite! This is the subversive genius of the Hebrew prophets. They wrote from a bottom-up perspective.

Imagine a history of colonial America written by Cherokee Indians and African slaves. That would be a different way of telling the story. And that's what the Bible does. It's the story of Egypt told by the slaves. The story of Babylon told by the exiles. The story of Rome told by the occupied. What about those brief moments when Israel appeared to be on top? In those cases, the prophets told Israel's story from the perspective of the peasant poor as a critique of the royal elite."

Throughout history, the church has done a better job with charity than it has with justice. Yet justice is spoken of in **more than 165 verses** in the Bible especially in Psalms, Proverbs, and the Prophets. The Book of Psalms is filled with descriptions of the Lord's concern for justice. **Psalm 103:6, "The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed."** **Psalm 10:17-18, "O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more."**

No one speaks more about justice in the Bible than the prophet Isaiah. **Isaiah 30:18, "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him."** The Bible teaches that justice is a chief attribute of the nature of God. God is the defender of the poor and the oppressed (Jeremiah 9:23-24; Psalm 10:17-18) and the demands of God's justice extend beyond the nation of Israel (Psalm 9:7-9; Daniel 4:27). **Since the justice of God is characterized by special regard for the poor and the weak, the same is demanded of God's people** (Deut. 10:18-19). When we work for and pursue justice, we're agents of God's will (Isaiah 59:15-16). Paul presents God's justice as a grace flowing into and through believers to the needy (2 Cor. 9:8-10). **The demand of God for justice is so central that other responses to God are empty or diminished if they exist without it** (Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 23:23). **Justice is demanded of all the people, but particularly of the political authorities** (Jeremiah 21:11-12; Isaiah 1:10, 17).

If you're not careful, it's easy to become accepting of wrongs in the world rather than working to right them, especially, if you benefit. **Proverbs 28:5-6** says, "***The evil do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely. Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich.***" In Isaiah 1, which is like a courtroom scene, after the Lord accuses the people of being guilty of so much injustice, then God extends a plea bargain. If the people will make themselves clean and cease to do evil; if they learn to do good and seek justice; if they rescue the oppressed and become obedient to the call of God, their sins will be forgiven, and they shall again "*eat of the good of the land*" (verse 19). If they reject the plea and continue to rebel, they'll face destruction and desolation.

In Isaiah's day, the fundamental economic and social unit was the extended family group. Widows and orphans, who didn't have an extended family, didn't have economic support or someone to speak on their behalf in court. As a result, they were among the most vulnerable members of society and at risk of being exploited. Like the people of Isaiah's time, we're called to correct oppression and to seek justice for those on the margins of society who don't have access to or influence with those in power.

In the events around the birth of Jesus, God makes a clear statement in coming into the world. God doesn't come via the powerful or the wealthy. God comes to a humble couple. The angels' announcement of a Savior who is Christ the Lord, isn't spoken to religious leaders, the message is given to shepherds. The baby whose birth we celebrate at Christmas grows up and becomes a servant leader who focusses on helping people to do what the Lord God says to do in Isaiah chapter 1, "***cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.***"

Jesus doesn't have to do **cease to do evil** because he never did anything evil. When he was tested in the wilderness by Satan, he answered every test by quoting God's word and being true to his calling. He didn't succumb to temptations to take care of his own legitimate needs, to seek power, or to avoid the path of suffering.

Jesus doesn't have to **learn to do good**, he teaches others what doing good looks like. He heals the sick, he feeds the hungry, he delivers those afflicted by demonic

oppression, he even raises the dead. In **Acts 10:38** Peter sums up what Jesus did, *“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and **how he went around doing good and healing all** who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.”* It would be awesome if when people thought of you, BBC, or Christians, their first thought was, *“those are the people who go around doing good.”*

Jesus didn't come to **seek justice**; he came to bring God's justice into reality. **Luke 4.16-19** tells us, “When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read and **the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him**. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring **good news to the poor**. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”* Jesus spends the rest of his life doing those things.

Jesus comes to **rescue the oppressed and let them go free**. Oppression is the unjust use of power at other people's expense. Oppression works in the Bible the same way it works today: the powerful take more for themselves at the expense of the weak. Jesus does the exact opposite of this; he used his power for other people's benefit, to help them to healing, wholeness, freedom, and salvation. We heard from the first five books of the Bible that living in harmony with God and the land involved seeking justice for widows, orphans, immigrants, the disabled, and the poor. Prophets like Isaiah and then Jesus continue this tradition.

The Lord says to **defend the orphan**, and Jesus says (Matthew 19-14-15), *“**Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.**”* And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.”

The Lord says through Isaiah, **plead for the widow** and we see Jesus interacting with widows at different times in his ministry. Jesus praised a widow for her generosity and faithfulness, lifting her up as an example to others in **Luke 21.1-4**. “He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also **saw a poor widow** put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, *“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has*

put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

In **Luke 7:11-16** we hear a remarkable story of Jesus intervening on behalf of a grieving widow. “11 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and **she was a widow**; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, *“Do not weep.”* 14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, *“Young man, I say to you, rise!”* 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, *“A great prophet has risen among us!”* and *“God has looked favorably on his people!”*

At Christmas time, we celebrate and remember that God has looked favorably on his people in giving us Christ who is good, trustworthy, caring, courageous, and he is for you in every way a person can be for you. Like Christ you and I are to share love with those who need it most, whatever their circumstance. Think of ways you can do that this Christmas season. Imagine what would happen in our community and beyond if all of us began to be as concerned for justice as the Lord God, the prophet Isaiah and Jesus?

Always remember Jesus came to proclaim and bring justice. In **Matthew 12:17-20** we hear these words from the prophet Isaiah (42:2) fulfilled in Jesus, *“Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, **and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.** He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick **until he brings justice to victory.** And in his name the Gentiles will hope.”*

We are the Gentiles whose hope is in Christ. **Be a person whose life is marked by love, justice, mercy, and faith. Justice is what love looks like in practice. “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”** Amen.

Blessing

“May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

To bring love, justice, and kindness to all our children and the poor.

Amen.”

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. For years, television programs that centered on courtrooms have been extremely popular. Why do you think that is the case?
2. When you hear the word “justice” what images come to mind?
3. Have you observed any differences in how the justice system treats the rich, famous, and powerful compared to the poor, obscure, and vulnerable?
4. Isaiah chapter one is like a cosmic courtroom drama in which the Lord both accuses the people and offers them a plea bargain. What are the people guilty of in the Lord’s eyes?
5. What does the plea bargain require of them and you?
6. How can we as a church and as individuals fulfill the Lord’s command to love those who need it most? How can we *“learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”*