

PENTECOST 9

Proper 14 - Year C

This Bible study was written by Kirstin Swanson for Proper 14 (C) in 2022.

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

1 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.

10 Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!

Listen 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 fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls
or of lambs or of goats.

12 When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?

Trample my courts no more!

13 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.

14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

15 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.

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove your evil deeds
from before my eyes;

cease to do evil;

17 learn to do good;

seek justice;

rescue the oppressed;

defend the orphan;

plead for the widow.

18 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?

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 devoured by the sword,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Commentary from Kirstin Swanson

The part of Isaiah that this reading comes from was written before the Babylonian Exile and is part of a series of oracles against Judah and Jerusalem. Judah was the southern part of what was once the united kingdom of Israel.

God's words to the people of Judah are hard to hear. The oracle Isaiah preaches compares Judah and the temple worship in Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah, and God refuses to hear their prayers. Though God does not abide the sins of Israel – their offerings are worthless in the shadow of their injustices – there is an opening for them to restore their relationship, to come back into covenant.

First, God opens the way for the Israelites to learn to do what pleases God: "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:17). Then, God invites the people into a conversation: "Let us argue it out" (1:18) refers to reasoned argumentation, not aggressive confrontation. God wants to reach toward the people with open hands of forgiveness and will accompany them as they work toward it.

Discussion Questions

In this passage, Isaiah points out a disconnect between the worship of the people in the temple and what they do outside of the temple. Do you observe the same disconnect in Christians? What are some examples of this?

What could Christians do that would close gaps between the ideals expressed in worship and the lives we live?

Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24

- ¹ The Lord, the God of gods, has spoken; *
he has called the earth from the rising of the
sun to its setting.
- ² Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty, *
God reveals himself in glory.
- ³ Our God will come and will not keep silence; *
before him there is a consuming flame,
and round about him a raging storm.
- ⁴ He calls the heavens and the earth from above *
to witness the judgment of his people.
- ⁵ "Gather before me my loyal followers, *
those who have made a covenant with me
and sealed it with sacrifice."
- ⁶ Let the heavens declare the rightness of his cause; *
for God himself is judge.
- ⁷ Hear, O my people, and I will speak:
"O Israel, I will bear witness against you; *
for I am God, your God.
- ⁸ I do not accuse you because of your sacrifices; *
your offerings are always before me.
- ²³ Consider this well, you who forget God, *
lest I rend you and there be none to deliver
you.
- ²⁴ Whoever offers me the sacrifice of thanksgiving
honors me; *
but to those who keep in my way will I show
the salvation of God."

Commentary from Kirstin Swanson

This psalm continues the theme of God's judgment, evident in the reading from Isaiah. God calls all of creation as witnesses to what seems like a heavenly court proceeding, at which the rightness of God's people is assessed. There is reference to sacrifice and offerings – alluding to the worship practices of the people of Israel – concluding with the promise of salvation for those who offer “the sacrifice of thanksgiving” (50:24).

For Christians, the Eucharist is closely associated with Thanksgiving. Referred to as “The Great Thanksgiving,” it is considered by the Book of Common Prayer to be our “principal act of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day and other major Feasts” (BCP, p. 13). The language of our Eucharistic prayers uses the words “sacrifice,” “offering,” and “thanksgiving” quite liberally. We are encouraged to bring our hearts and bodies to God during the Eucharist. Many congregations celebrate the Eucharist weekly, though, during the lockdowns imposed as a result of COVID-19, most congregations refrained.

Discussion Questions

This Psalm shows judgment being made on worship and sacrifice. If we were to imagine God coming in judgment, how might God assess our “sacrifice of thanksgiving”?

How might we offer our worship in a more thanksgiving-forward way?

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith, with Sarah's involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴ for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Commentary from Kirstin Swanson

In this passage from Hebrews, we hear the story of Abraham and Sarah cast as a story of faith in God's promises. Abraham and Sarah, argues the writer, trusted that God's promises would be fulfilled in God's own time. These words were likely written within 50 years of Jesus' resurrection and were meant as an assurance to those following the nascent Christian faith that, if Abraham and Sarah can act in faith, trusting that God would prepare a city for them, Christians can draw inspiration from them, and trust that God's will shall unfold in God's own time.

It's been a long time since these words were written to reassure first-century Christians. We are still waiting for the full revelation of God's kingdom on earth. Just like the descendants of Abraham, many generations of Christians "died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them" (v. 13).

Discussion Questions

Sometimes, the idea that the promises of God will be revealed in God's own time can breed complacency. But the author of Hebrews argues that Abraham's, Sarah's, and their offspring's faith in God's future promises kept them moving. Is there a promise you hope for that inspires your faith? How does that promise inspire you?

Luke 12:32-40

³² “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ 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. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

³⁵ “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷ Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night or near dawn and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

³⁹ “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Commentary from Kristin Swanson

This Gospel reading brings together the themes of trusting the future to God and God’s judgment, evident in today’s other readings. The verse “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (12:34) is one of the most well-known verses in the Bible – maybe you’ve heard it used in a stewardship campaign. But this comes after verses about selling possessions, giving alms, and making purses that do not wear out, to store the treasure in heaven. It may be about trading your certainty for uncertainty, trust in what kingdoms of earth can give for what the kingdom of God can bring.

Verses 35-39 have a sense of urgency: be ready for the master to return! Jesus says to “have your lamps lit” (35), to “be ready” (40). Today we might say “keep your ringtone on!” Why? Because we don’t know when the Son of Man will arrive (v. 40). What are we to be ready for? “The kingdom” that is the “Father’s good pleasure to give to you” (32).

Discussion Questions

This Gospel reading tells us to be ready for the kingdom of God’s arrival at an unexpected hour. What images does “the kingdom of God” bring to mind for you?

How would you describe life in the kingdom of God? How does the phrase “good pleasure” fit with those images, that description?