“Let Us Reason Together,” Isaiah 1:1-20 (Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 1, 2024)

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. **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.”

**4**Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. **5**Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? 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.

**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. **9**If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

**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.

**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; your hands are full of blood. **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.

**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.”

***“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God!”***

We begin a new series this morning in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is a book in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and it’s been called by some “the fifth gospel” because it contains all these detailed prophecies of Jesus Christ and its many, many offers of salvation.

The New Testament writers quote or allude to Isaiah more than sixty times, which is more than any other major prophet (e.g., Jeremiah, Ezekiel), and more than all the minor prophets (e.g., Hosea, Joel, Amos) combined.

Isaiah’s prophetic ministry began in 740 B.C. (we know that because of Isaiah 6, where we read that God called him in the year that King Uzziah died, and we’re able to date his death with reasonable accuracy). Therefore, the book we are studying this fall is over 2700 years old.

Isaiah, we read in verse one, is preaching to the people of “Judah and Jerusalem.” At the point in redemptive history, the people of God are all contained within one group of people: the Jews, people descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, also known as Israel. The people are at the time of Isaiah divided into two nations: the northern kingdom, which retained the name “Israel,” and the southern kingdom, commonly called “Judah,” with the city of Jerusalem as its capital.

Isaiah’s ministry centered on the southern kingdom: the people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. God did not send prophets like Isaiah in good times, when all is right between God and his people. Instead, the prophets began their ministries in bad times. The people of God in the Old Testament were in a covenant relationship with God; they owed God obedience. And when they failed to obey God, he would send prophets to set forth the charges he was making against his people and warn them of the consequences of continued disobedience. That’s why the prophets have been called “covenant prosecutors.”

And that’s what we’ll see in our text for this morning. Isaiah lists the charges God is making against Judah, and I want to show you three things from this text, then I’ll invite all believers in Jesus Christ to take the Lord’s Supper: *first, rebellion against God always leads to destruction.* *Second, false worship of God is not the answer.* *Third, reasoning with God leads to restoration.*

First, rebellion against God always leads to destruction. Let’s read verse 2-5a. This is Isaiah preaching the Word of God to the people of God in Judah: “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.’ **4**Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. **5**Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel?”

The people of God are called in the Scriptures “God’s chosen people.” God marked them out as his own. They were God’s way of saying to the whole world, “If you want to know what I am like, watch them. They will be witnesses, testifying to my character.”  
  
One thing fundamental to the character of the God of the Bible is that he does not play favorites. He is no respecter of persons. Your wealth and status might turn heads of other people, but he’s not impressed by all the things that so easily impress you and me, because from the moment of conception right up to the moment of death, every human life on earth matters intensely to God.

But God’s people, by how they lived, lied about God’s character. They rebelled against his laws on this matter such as, for example, Exodus 22:21-24: “You shall not wrong a sojourner [that’s someone traveling through your country who is not a citizen; we might call him an immigrant today] or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. **22**You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. **23**If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, **24**and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”

One of the charges the prophets make against Judah throughout the Old Testament is their lack of care for the poor. It’s not just that they neglect the poor and the orphan and the widow and don’t help them; they actively afflict them. That’s verse 17: Isaiah says, “correct oppression.” We’ll talk more about how they were oppressing the poor next week. In fact, the people of Judah are so active in their oppression that verse 17 also says they need to “learn to do good.” They’re so practiced at doing evil they don’t even know how to be good anymore.

Therefore, through the prophet Isaiah, God says to his people in Judah, “You lie about me because you don’t care for the helpless around you. You say you know me, Judah, but you don’t. You wouldn’t live like this if you did.”

In verse 3, Isaiah says that an ox, a cow, is smart enough to recognize its owner, and a donkey knows where to get its food (walks back to the feeding trough every day to eat), but Judah does not know the Lord, because they don’t obey his law.

If you’re here this morning and you’re not a Christian, welcome. But I wonder how that phrase strikes you: “the law of God.” What comes to mind when you hear that? I can tell you that for me, for a long time, I thought the law of God was oppressive. I thought, “There is no way a red-blooded American male can enjoy life by trying to live the way the Bible says.” Maybe you react that way, too.

But do you know what the law of God actually says? It says things like, “Honor your parents.” That doesn’t mean you have to agree with them on everything, but it means as much as possible to keep them in your life and be thankful for them. It says, “Love your spouse. Be considerate as you live with your wife, even when it seems she’s not considerate with you. Respect your husband, even when you don’t necessarily respect his decision.”

It says, “Always give to the poor in secret. Never sue a fellow Christian. Never take revenge. Be kind. Always show hospitality. Give money away cheerfully. Don’t be anxious. Don’t judge another Christian over a matter of conscience. Always forgive.”

That’s the law and ***friends, the law of God is not oppressive.*** Paul in Romans 12:10 says, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” That’s a good summary of the law of God. What would your family be like if everyone in it was determined to outdo one another in showing honor? Do you think anyone would feel oppressed? No. The law of God isn’t oppressive; ***it’s when we ignore the law of God that we turn into oppressors.***

That’s what Judah did (it’s all over the first five chapters of Isaiah). They rebelled against God and his law, oppressed people, and ultimately ***their rebellion led to their destruction.*** “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.” Isaiah 1:5b-6. In other words, Isaiah says, “The people of Judah are a body completely covered in scabs and bruises. They are a walking wound.”

“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.” Isaiah 1:7-8. Jerusalem, the great city, the city of the kings of God’s people, is reduced to a shack. Today we might say, “The daughter of Zion is left like a port-a-potty at an abandoned construction site.”

Rebellion against God always leads to destruction. It’s not easy to directly translate God’s prophecies against his people in the Old Covenant (like Judah) to his people in the New Covenant (the church in the present day), because Judah was a nation in covenant relationship with God. The nation and the church were the same thing. When Moses built the tabernacle (around which all the people promised obedience to the law of God), you could say he built it with “government” money, with tax dollars. Then God himself came down in the glory cloud to ratify the covenant. Citizenship in the Judah meant membership in the Old Testament church, and vice versa.

Christians today are not in the same boat. God does not have a covenant relationship with nations anymore. When the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, God didn’t come down in the glory cloud on Independence Hall in Philadelphia to ratify it. You’re not part of a church by virtue of being an American citizen.

So, it’s not super helpful to look at the shortcomings of political policy in the United States and then say, “America is in rebellion against God, so he is going to do to Washington, D.C. what he did to Jerusalem; turn it into a wasteland.” It doesn’t work that way.

I confess that I’m still trying to work out how to apply Old Testament prophecies against nations to countries, nation-states, in the present day. But on an individual level we can clearly see from both nature and Scripture that rebellion against God and his law leads to destruction.

It leads to destruction in this life. There are physical, emotional, and psychological consequences to rebellion against God. Certainly, if you abuse drugs, alcohol, and sex, if you have a terrible diet, never exercise, and sleep one hour per night, you’ll find your body falling apart. You can die in your twenties or thirties if you work at it like that.

But even the much more mundane forms of rebellion lead to destruction. When I disobey God’s law by being unkind to others, or when jealous feelings take over, or when I am angry or worry excessively, I can feel it in my body. I carry those things in my chest and stomach. It can’t be good to walk around like that all the time, constantly angry or anxious. I do think there are people who go their entire adult life like that, and it puts them in an early grave.

Rebellion leads to destruction in this life and the next. If reject God, if you run away from him and say, “I want nothing to do with you,” God will let you. Hell, C.S. Lewis said, is the greatest monument to human freedom. He writes, “There are only two kinds of people – those who say [to God] ‘Thy will be done’ or those to whom God in the end says, ‘Thy will be done.’ All those who are in Hell choose it … No soul that serious and constantly desires joy will ever miss it.”

Did you know that Jesus talked about hell more than anyone else in the Bible? If you’re determined to rebel against God in this life, he’ll let you. And in judgment he’ll allow the destruction to continue in the next life … which makes it an everlasting death.

So, what do we do? Second, false worship of God is not the answer. To me the most discouraging thing to read in Isaiah 1 is that in the middle of all this rebellion, the people of Judah still went to church! They continue to participate in the forms of worship. Verse 11 tells us they continued to offer the animal sacrifices mandated by the Levitical laws. Verse 13 says they offered incense as they were commanded and continued to meet every Sabbath Day and gather at other times during the month for revival services. Verse 14 says they continued in their fellowship meals after church and verse 15 says they continued to pray.

But God says, “I hate all of it. I hate it all your religious activities. They make me sick. They make me want to vomit.” In verse 10 he compares his people to Sodom and Gomorrah, the two ungodliest cities the earth had ever seen. It’s the ultimate insult to Judah.

Why is God to disgusted? Because of Judah’s hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is when you say you believe one thing but then do the opposite. It’s like preaching a dad sitting his children down and telling them how special sex is and how it’s only for a husband and wife, and then two days later they find out he has a mistress.

The people of Judah say they believe in the Lord, whose name is Yahweh, creator of heaven and earth. But obviously they don’t because they disobey his law, and therefore their religious activities only anger God more.

I’ve got to ask the question: why are you here this morning, in church? Why did you come? I’m not talking right now to those of you who aren’t Christians, or even to those who are looking for a church home. But you who like me have basically been in church all your life. Why are you here? Why did you come? What are you hoping to accomplish?

Are you here just for your kids? It’s what you do when you have children, you try to give them a moral foundation, so that’s why you’re here.

Are you here just to check a box? Because you know this is what good, respectable people in our community do?   
  
Are you here to be seen by others? So, they can know you’re the kind of person who goes to church, and maybe you’d be good to do business with?

Or, God forbid, are you here because you’re trying to buy off God? You say to yourself, “I kind of overdid it last night after the game, but going to church will straighten things up. My husband will get off my back and I bet God will, too.” Or “I’ve gone to church, I’ve sat through the sermon, so now God owes me because I’ve paid my dues.”  
  
Isaiah says it does no good to participate in religious activities in the name of the God of the Bible, even if you do it every Sunday without fail, if there is zero intent to obey that God the following Monday through Saturday. That is hypocrisy, it is false worship, and God hates it.

When you read the New Testament gospels, who are the people that Jesus continually condemns? The Pharisees. The religious leaders of his day who were always in church. About them, Jesus said, “**27**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. **28**So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” Matthew 23:27-28.

We have rebelled against God’s law, and just showing up at church without any intent to change ***only makes God’s anger at our rebellion worse***. So, what can we do? What is the solution?

Third, reasoning with God leads to restoration. I’ve told you the wrong way to go to church. What’s the right way? Put another way, what’s always the right attitude to have when you dare approach God, either individually or at church?

***Humility and contrition.*** Here’s how you go to church: you walk in the building on a Sunday morning and you say, “The biggest problem in my life is me. Something is wrong with me, God. I can’t stop doing these things your Word tells me not to do. I can’t stop worrying about my children. I can’t control my anger. I can’t be generous. I can make time for the stuff I want to do but when someone needs me I selfishly disappear and I feel totally powerless over these things, Father. I cannot love others as I ought or outdo other people in showing honor.

“So, I’m coming to church this Sunday and I’m begging for your help. I know I don’t deserve anything from you, but I’m asking for it anyway. Have mercy on and change me, O God.”  
  
And you know what? The God of Judah loves to answer those kinds of prayers. One of my favorite passages of Scripture on this point is found at the end of Psalm 51 (verses 16-17): “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering [we saw that in Isaiah 1; hypocritical worship only makes things worse]. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken [or humble] and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

In verse 18, the Lord gives us a promise and dares us to take him up on it. He says, “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.” It’s verses like these that give Isaiah the nickname “the fifth gospel.”

For eight hundred years God’s people in the old covenant had to wrestle with that promise. He says, “Let us reason together.” That is not an invitation from God for Judah to try and figure out with him a solution for their problem. God isn’t saying to Judah, “Hey, let’s talk this out.” Instead, that word translated as “reason” means to “think intensely” or “fixate” or “intellectually wrestle.”

For eight hundred years, God’s people had to wrestle with a mystery: God is holy, he hates sin and punishes it, yet he is determined to make us pure and perfect. All Israel could do year in and year out over those centuries was to look at the sacrifice of the bulls and goats at the temple, see the blood of those animals shed instead of their own, and say, “Somehow God is using these animals to show me he’s forgiven my sins and made my guilty soul white as snow.”

But then, after eight hundred years, the mystery was revealed. God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, came into the world. He lived the life we should have lived (a life of perfect obedience under God’s law; not an ounce of rebellion in him). He outdid everyone in showing others honor. Then, on the cross, he shed his blood for his people and died the death that rebels and false worshipers like us deserve.

All the anger God has at your sin and rebellion Jesus Christ extinguished on the cross. Now, there is nothing waiting for you in the heart of God except love. All you have to do is humbly and contritely ask him for it. Will you do it?

“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.” Isaiah 1:19-20.

Here’s the dilemma all of us face this morning: we can either repent of our sins, obey God, ***and eat***; be loved by God, be accepted by him, and have all our needs met in and by him. We can repent, obey, and eat … or we can refuse, rebel, and be eaten. We can be devoured by our sins, our worries, our lusts, our anger, our fears.

Which will it be? For those who repent and wish to obey God, it’s my privilege as a minister of the gospel to welcome you to the Lord’s table. ***I invite you to eat and drink.*** Take the bread and the cup by faith that because of Jesus Christ God will forgive your sins. And then reason with God. Think like this: “No matter what I’ve done, no matter how many times I’ve blown it, God will make me white as snow and as if my rebellion never happened.” Ask God to bind up your wounds. Ask him to heal your heart. Ask him to strengthen your hands for service. And keep coming back, week after week, to receive a fresh supply from God’s unlimited grace. PRAY