

December 20, 2015 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

There Will Be a Reckoning

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Isaiah 56:1-12

The Covenant Extended to All Who Obey

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. ² Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil. ³ Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.”

⁴ For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, ⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. ⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— ⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

⁸ Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

The Corruption of Israel’s Rulers

⁹ All you wild animals, all you wild animals in the forest, come to devour! ¹⁰ Israel’s sentinels are blind, they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs that cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. ¹¹ The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. The shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, to their own gain, one and all.

¹² “Come,” they say, “let us get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink. And tomorrow will be like today, great beyond measure.”

The story of the Bible is a love story between God and a particular people: a people wooed by God and then called to live in such a way as to woo all other people into relationship with God too.

This way was -- and IS -- called holiness. In Isaiah 56, it goes by the words *justice* and *righteousness*.

Keep the Sabbath and don't do evil. From Moses to Abraham, through the judges and the kings, and finally the prophets, the instructions couldn't be easier to understand: Do what is right; don't do what is evil.

Prophets, the Bible's most thankless job, tell people to do what people most don't like to do. . . which is *what*?

To change. To change how we think, to change how we act, and to change upon what we shall depend.

Do what is right. Don't do what is evil. -- Seems like it should be so easy.

It is not easy. And because it is not easy, human beings have forever been in some phase of obedience, rebellion, or repentance in relation to these instructions.

Isaiah 56, also known as 3rd Isaiah, comes at the end of long exile after even longer rebellion. Persia defeated Babylon; and their king, Cyrus, was allowing some displaced people to return to their homelands to rebuild.

A Jewish governor named Sheshbazzar was appointed in Jerusalem, and things were underway there but the going was rough. Crops were failing. Inflation was terrible. The baby court system was already corrupt. The religious system was too. The prophet's greatest complaint, not specifically mentioned in chapter 56: work on rebuilding the Temple had stopped completely. What he does focus on is how their neglect of the brick and mortar elements of religious life reflect a deeper spiritual problem.

Remember, these are the core believers, the remnant of the faithful, the ones who pulled up stakes in Babylon to go back; and they are the ones struggling to understand God's will for their lives and their life together. The problem in Isaiah 56 is not brick and mortar, but rather community, or fellowship: who is welcome -- and who isn't -- among the neighbors who desired to keep faith with them. . . specifically eunuchs and foreigners, two sets of people that Jewish code excluded from full participation in religious worship.

To be clear: eunuchs were men who had been castrated, intentionally or by accident. Depending on when it happened, they might have been small, or feminine-like, or might have had higher voices. The hardest part was, they couldn't/didn't marry or have kids, and so their family line died out with them.

And *foreigners*. . . . You know the joke, "What do they call Chinese food in China?"

Food.

Everyone is a foreigner, depending on where she's standing at the moment. The world is full of displaced people, making life as best they can where they are.

Whatever else the Bible says about foreigners and worship, *on this page* God says that a person's desire to keep faith with God's people erases every other difference between him and us. "*And they will NOT be kept out,*" the prophet says.

⁴ For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, ⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

(Friends, please don't miss the word play here!)

⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. ⁸ Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

God will bring them in -- to God's own house. While God's people do *what*?

¹⁰ Israel's sentinels are blind, they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs that cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. ¹¹ The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. The shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, to their own gain, one and all. ¹² "Come," they say, "let us get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink. And tomorrow will be like today, great beyond measure."

The sentinels and shepherds are the ones already inside, appointed – called – to holiness, to a life of such profound obedience the whole world would see and flock to be part of their life in God.

A people busy, but lost; working hard at the wrong things; getting ahead in the things that do not last; falling further and further behind in the things that do. All the while saying to themselves and each other, "Isn't this great? And tomorrow will be just as awesome."

Like side-by-side realities, both called faithful yet looking nothing alike:

The will of God which God is actually doing.

God's people doing what they want and calling it God's will.

One focused outside the self, always drawing others in.

The other focused on the self, keeping others out.

One considerate of the well-being of others.

The other considerate of satisfying the self only.

Except, not just satisfying: *stuffing*, overwhelming, blinding, paralyzing, the self. And then lying to that bloated blimp of a self, "Aren't we just the greatest people who ever were?"

Another verse of the same song sung since Moses, inevitably followed by a prophetic promise: there will be a reckoning, a time, a day, when these parallel realities converge and the truth of their differences is worked out.

On that day there will be judgement, and punishment.

And thus goes the Bible story, again and again and again, bringing us – finally – *here*, to the passage Tucker read, to the last Sunday of Advent.

Almost to Christmas, the moment of eternity when God might have changed God's mind. No more endless cycle of commandments-obedience-rebellion-threats-and-punishment.

A moment in which God seems, maybe, to have laid aside the clipboard and said, "I'm their Creator, not their warden. From now on, I'll only love them; they can love me back or not. Love each other, or not. They are mine, no matter what. . . . *Enough of these prophets, I'll go myself.*"

And the gospel of Christ unfolds, so that preachers and prophets persuade, but carry no threats of judgement, only promises of grace. It's been all good news since then, all good news from here.

This is the reckoning, friends. Good news that we've been given another year of life, of life together, in which to be God's people in this time and place, to arm ourselves with the truth and the courage, the justice and the strength, to wake up, to sit up, to get up, and to show up, depending on God instead of ourselves, thinking Godly thoughts, doing good, not evil.

Because, in Christ it is not simply possible: it is *who we are*, it is *why we are here*, sharing this sweet life together.