

Blessed Assurance

Isaiah 1:10-20

Hebrews 11:1-3

Our passage from Isaiah tells us much of what God wants—and does not want—from us. Our passage from Hebrews tells us another thing God wants from us. At a Presbytery meeting I once sat at lunch with an elder who had known me since I was in the ninth grade. Sadly, she has long since passed away, but I feel confident she would be happy for me to share this story. Two other people sat at our little table. They were having a gentle argument over the purpose of the church. One took the general view that the church should focus on pursuing justice and serving the poor. The other argued that the church should focus on worship and spiritual matters. Neither denied the validity of the other's preference; they simply felt they themselves each had the correct position. After a few minutes of listening my elder friend spoke up. “I want it all,” she said. “I want my church to be deeply involved in the issues in our community and I want to join in meaningful worship services.”

The first chapter of the Book of Isaiah contains a string of visions that severely criticize—even threaten—the people of Isaiah's native Judah. They follow a pattern: God has blessed the people with freedom, the land, children and grandchildren. They have responded ungratefully. They worship foreign gods and sin in many other ways as well. The pagan armies pressing in on all sides are but one of the ways God is punishing the people. Most of the visions end there. Two of them, though, continue

with God's promise to restore the people with all the blessings of the covenant, ***if they will return to obedience to God. If they will work for justice and if they will worship the Lord God only.***

Our eleven verses from Isaiah contain the latter, longer pattern. They start with sarcasm, calling the rulers Sodomites and the people of Judah natives of Gomorrah. These of course were the two cities inhabited by notorious sinners whom the Lord destroyed in Genesis 19. A scathing criticism of insincere sacrifice and worship follows, culminating with the scathing, "I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly." The Lord wants nothing to do with people who follow the rules on the surface only. Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America, said in his inaugural address, "(Slavery) was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation... it has existed in all ages, and has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts."

Jefferson Davis was a Presbyterian. (And in fact a sneaky part of the answer for the trivia question, "To which kind of church have the largest number of American presidents belonged?" The answer is Presbyterian, the number is eleven, and it includes Monroe, Eisenhower, Reagan—though he rarely attended—and Jeff Davis.) Though hardly unique, his attitude toward slavery placed him squarely among those who could perform great evils yet sit in solemn assembly Sunday and after Sunday. The Lord tells Isaiah to tell us that we can spread forth our hands (a posture of prayer)

as much as we like, but so long as we remain hypocritical sinners, “I will not listen.”

God continues, “...your hands are full of blood.” And now comes the twist in the pattern, the part where God holds out hope for those who can change their ways. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your ways from before my eyes...” The 17th verse follows with six clean, terse imperatives: “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.” What does God **not** want? Surface piety. Hypocrisy. Religious rituals engaged in by people who do not fear the Lord sufficiently to straighten up and fly right. What does God want? The kinds of tangible ministry to the lost and broken those six imperatives embody. Stop sinning. Start doing good for those who cannot take care of themselves. Feed the hungry. Secure resources for orphans. Protect those being bullied. Work for better treatment of the mentally ill.

This vision of Isaiah's concludes with one more restatement of the two paths, this time in reverse order. “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.” It is not too late. You can get washed of your sins and turn away from continuing to commit them. “But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” If you fail to change your ways an army will invade and you will fall to its swords. This exact thing happened near the end of Isaiah's life, when the Babylonians overwhelmed Judah from the east.

Frances Jane Crosby was born in 1820 in Putnam County, New York. She went

blind at the age of six weeks from a home-made ointment her mother used to treat an eye infection. It did not seem to slow her down. She grew up to become a teacher of English and history at the New York Institute for the Blind. She wrote poetry, including one piece she wrote for Senator Henry Clay, to whom she recited it in person. She wrote perhaps three hundred popular songs, almost all of them under dozens of pen names, some of them male. She wrote the words and musics for two cantatas, orchestral works that lasted about 45 minutes each.

Fanny Crosby also wrote dozens of hymns, including our last number today, Blessed Assurance. Yes, she, a blind person, wrote the words, “Visions of rapture now burst on my sight...” And, “watching and waiting, looking above...” She could write these lyrics because she had the thing the author of Hebrews tells us God wants us to have: faith. Dare we say **blind** faith? It is, after all, the conviction of **things not seen**. The anonymous writer will use the rest of the chapter lifting up Old Testament examples of men and women who shared in this assurance of things hoped for, this faith. These people witnessed to us, the author says, that we might follow their example and obtain faith, which connects us with God. If we could **see** God, if we could **prove** God, we would not need faith. But we cannot and we do.

God wants us to believe in Jesus despite the fact not a one of us has laid eyes on him. God wants us to do concrete ministry in his name to the last and least among us. In fact, by so doing we make Jesus visible to a world struggling mightily to believe in him. Believe in, and **do**, Jesus. It will gain you your own Blessed Assurance.