



*Russian icon of the Prophet Isaiah,
18th century BCE,
(iconostasis of Transfiguration Church,
Kizhi monastery, Karelia, Russia)*

Good morning. I have a little story to share with you. It goes like this:

It was February 2018, a day like any other day. Once again, Eliat Mazar had her fingers in the dirt. She thought about her first dig, as an eleven-year old girl full of wonder, accompanying her father, a Russian Jew and a renown secular archeologist, to the excavation site just outside the walls of the ancient city of Jerusalem.

She shook her head to get her bearings. She looked up into the overcast sky, the same as it ever was, Stratus clouds above, layered like the layers of sand and sediment below. Layered like the history of this sacred place. The rocks and the gravel held secrets. Sometimes, if you knew the language well enough, and knew what to look for, and when, they gave up their secrets. Again she stared down at what was in the palm of her hand. Her finger lightly brushed the newly discovered object, the size of a button. Could it possibly be, she wondered?

Thinking of all the people in the world who collected autographs – of Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson, Mark Twain, Athletes, Celebrities. Rock Stars.

Was she actually holding in her hand the autograph, a bulla, really - - a 2700 year-old piece of clay imprinted with a seal... .. of the prophet Isaiah? ... Something the likes of which had never been discovered, never known before.

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Let us pause right there for a moment. Can we go back and look at the first reading for today? Take a moment to open up the service bulletin and find it.

What was your first reaction to this reading?

'Cause God is really mad. Or the Prophet is really mad. Or the Prophet is saying that God is really mad. How does this passage make you feel?

It is like the Greatest Hits of God's Righteous Indignation, isn't it?

The time is eight centuries before Christ, arguably about the year 701 BCE. King Hezekiah is on the throne of the southern Kingdom of Judah. Sennacherib is the ruler of the powerful Assyrian Empire to the North. In the language of Facebook, the relationship between Hezekiah and Sennacherib was ... complicated. The Judeans lived under constant threat of invasion and devastation. Their national theology was that the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, would protect them. **They believed that God was on their side.**

This makes the Prophet angry. Or, perhaps, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, this makes God angry.

"Hear the word of the Lord,
 you rulers of Sodom!
 Listen to the teaching of our God,
 you people of Gomorrah!

Sodom and Gomorrah, in the religious language of the time, represented ancient cities who were utterly destroyed because of their notorious sins. What were the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, you ask? Probably not what you think. The prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 16:49) defines them as having "pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease" while failing to "aid the poor and needy."

(The Sodom and Gomorrah story, as an aside, is definitely in the top ten of most widely misunderstood bible stories. But I'll leave that for another day, or for those who choose to peruse the sermon footnotes in the printed copy in the narthex and on the web later.)

And then Isaiah goes on to detail God's outrage.

He lists all the particulars of their worship, all the rituals, and festivals, and worship services... how the people sacrifice expensive rams, bulls, lambs and goats, but... but...

all the while they neglect the basic needs of the poor:

"your appointed festivals my soul hates; [says the Lord]
 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."

So what *is it* that God expects / longs for / demands:

Is it as the Prophet Micha wrote:

“**Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God?**” (Malachi 6:8)

Isaiah proclaims: The Word of the Lord says:

“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.”

And then... and this has to be my favorite line that God has in this passage:

*“Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:”*

In other translations, it reads **“Let’s settle this once and for all.”**

I love that. Through the prophets Ezekiel, Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah... God’s heart is turned toward the vulnerable in mercy and God’s wrath is turn against the powerful and the privileged who do not use their power and advantage and wealth to care for others. Time and time again, God’s prophets proclaim the same call, the same judgement, the same invitation to change.

1.) **Worship, but worship with integrity.** Don’t pray for the poor and marginalized and then fail to take concrete actions in your daily lives that makes a meaningful difference.

2.) **Practice justice and mercy.**

“The people’s hands are full of blood in the sense that they have been mistreating people. They have not been practicing sound ethics in their dealings with the oppressed and vulnerable.”¹

¹ Michael L. Ruffin: See <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-3/commentary-on-isaiah-11-10-20-5>

Now maybe you grew up in a church tradition where preachers carefully select what passages of scripture they choose to avoid. And maybe you have never heard this or any of the many other similar passages of Holy Scripture. But this and the Exodus story of liberation comprise the backbone of the Bible.

This is the one and the same message that was proclaimed in the Gospel appointed for today:

“Jesus said to his followers: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 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.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;”

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Back in Jerusalem, on that February day in 2019, Eliat Mazar held the small piece of ancient clay in her hands. For that brief moment, the distance between the 8th century prophets and the present day seemed very small indeed. Time stood still, and only the clouds moved overhead.

Perhaps Eliat wondered what Isaiah would make of us today: our fine assemblies, modern worship technology, churches of beauty and brilliance, and ever-so tasteful liturgies, carefully crafted with each word approved by committee.

Or of our beloved nation, one of the last superpowers left in the world, comprising a little more than 4% of the world's population, but almost a third of the world's wealth.

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On May 25th of last year, after a long illness, Eliat Mazar breathed her last breath. Like Isaiah before her, whose bones have returned to the dust of the earth, she too rests with her ancestors,

That small bulla, perhaps once being the seal of Isaiah, now rests in a museum.

But does the Word of the Lord ever rest?

Or does it still ring out clearly, both a warning and an invitation to each and every one of us.

If anything is to change, it begins with us.

From a Commentary of Isaiah 1,

by biblical scholar Anthea Portier-Young, who serves as the Associate Professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity School:

“Sodom and Gomorrah were a byword for Isaiah’s implied audience (Isaiah 3:9; 13:19; see also Ezekiel 16:56). The names “Sodom” and “Gomorrah” evoked for biblical writers complete and utter destruction (Amos 4:11), “a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever” (Zephaniah 2:9 NRSV) with no inhabitant (Isaiah 13:20; Jeremiah 49:18; 50:40). The destruction of these cities and their inhabitants was viewed as an act of God (Isaiah 13:19; Amos 4:11) and as punishment (Genesis 19; Lamentations 4:6). But contrary to a prominent stream of medieval and modern Christian biblical interpretation, the prophets of Israel did not identify the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah with sexual activity, and preachers today would do well to resist interpretations that would twist Isaiah’s oracle into a tirade directed at sexual minorities.¹

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Sodom and Gomorrah, from Encyclopedia Britannica²

Modern scholarship, particularly in [Judaism](#) and certain branches of [Christianity](#), has proposed that it is the inhabitants’ lack of hospitality, not their homosexuality, that gives offense to God. According to this view, the mob’s demands to [rape](#) the angelic guests reveals their deep-seated violence and inhospitality and is meant to stand in striking contrast to the gracious [hospitality](#) given by both [Abraham](#) and Lot to those same strangers. Indeed, both Abraham and Lot generously welcomed and fed the angelic strangers, Abraham with a choice calf specially prepared (18:7–8) and Lot with a feast and an invitation to rest for the night (19:2–3). To further this claim, some cite the words of [Jesus](#) in Matthew 10:14–15:

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

Here, it is argued, Christ is implying that the grave [sin](#) of Sodom and Gomorrah, and of any towns that refuse his [disciples](#), is that of inhospitality. Additionally, Ezekiel 16:49 mentions the inhabitants’ refusal to care for the poor despite their prosperity, which is taken as further evidence that homosexuality is not the cause of their damnation.

1. On the history of interpretation that conflated the crimes of Sodom and Gomorrah with forms of male same-sex intercourse, see Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Routledge, 2004).

² See: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sodom-and-Gomorrah/Religious-views>



Eliot Mazar in Jerusalem.

<https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/44/2/7>

Mazar, E. (2018). Is This the Prophet Isaiah's Signature? *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 44(2), 64–73,92.

The Destruction of Sennacherib

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay wither'd and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he pass'd;
And the eyes of the sleepers wax'd deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there roll'd not the breath of his pride:
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow and the rust on his mail;
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!¹³

—Lord Byron



Playlist:

Blood Red (America)

A song by [The Call](#)

Did we ask for trouble when we asked for
breath?
A silent witness put to the test
In a frozen moments an offering made
Foreign rumors live to this day, sing on yeah

Do, you feel protected inside the white walls?
A world neglected heads for a fall
A fate suspended each day is a gift
A world offended, God what is this?

He says, "We'll walk in the front door
And proudly raise our heads"
I say, "Man you must be joking
Our hands are covered blood red"

Got a way that's easy, the territory's marked
Hurl us backwards back to the start
A cool deception, a gifted tongue
Nations falling down, down, down

He says, "We'll walk in the front door
And proudly raise our heads"
I say, "Man you must be foolin'
Our hands are covered blood red"

Well, I see you standing beneath the tree
Your hands uplifted, on bended knee
In a fateful hour you hear another voice
I must remember what was my choice

He says, "I am the One, the One for you"
A look in Your eyes can tell me what to do
I feel ecstatic, I feel transformed
More than conquered down to the bone

Yeah then we'll walk in right through heaven's
door

And proudly raise our heads
I say, "Man you must be dreaming
Our hands are covered blood red"

They're covered blood red...

Songwriters: Michael Been

*Blood Red (America) Lyrics © BMG Rights
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Michael Been, a songwriter and musician who was quite public about his Christian faith in Jesus, reported writing this song in the 1980s after hearing a speech then-President Ronald Reagan gave to a gathering of conservative evangelical clergy, in which he declared that we would walk in the door of heavens gate with our hands and heads held high. It echoes Isaiah.

Scriptures Appointed for Today:

The Collect

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

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.

Hear the word of the Lord,
 you rulers of Sodom!
 Listen to the teaching of our God,
 you people of Gomorrah!
 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.

The Psalm - 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."

The Epistle - Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 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.

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. 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. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old-- and Sarah herself was barren-- because he considered him faithful who had promised. 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."

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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

The Gospel - Luke 12:32-40

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 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. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 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. 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. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

"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. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."