



Sermon: God our Pursuer
Isaiah 1
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February 5, 2017

I am so thrilled to begin ministry *again* among you here at Central. As we move together to seek to live faithfully as disciples of Jesus more than disciples of our culture, it has seemed to me that the book of Isaiah is a wonderful place to start. Why?

It is a bit like the whole Bible in one book. Why? We read about Creation, God's power creating his world, we read about the fall, about his covenant promises to his people, about the covenant promises to bring a redeemer Messiah to shepherd us and about the restoration of his world, renewing heaven and earth. So here in this one book, we have from Genesis to Revelation.

It also is fitting to begin here because although the millennia separate us from the people of Judah, the southern kingdom, the original hearers of these prophecies, we are quite similar. During Isaiah's ministry, the kingdom that was united under David and Solomon had divided, Israel to the North and Judah to the South. You may remember that Israel was conquered by the brutal Assyrians and the best and brightest exiled in 722 B.C. Judah looked on from the south and wondered about their fate. Will we be carried off, too? Will our people collapse like our brothers to the north? It was a time of great fear, perhaps like our own? What will become of us as God's people? How do we stand up? How do we live faithfully when our world may appear to be fraying?

And in that fear, again, perhaps like us, they clung to what they had to make them feel secure: their wealth and religiosity. The people of Judah, especially the leaders lost a sense of need for God. Why cry out for justice, when we can buy it for ourselves? Why care for the orphan or widow? We are quite comfortable, thank you. Why have a desperation before God? We are wealthy enough to buy the protection and alliance of powerful armies—they will defend us. Perhaps we have more in common with these people than we would care to admit.

What does the Lord have to say to us, who equally are desperate for a Shepherd in fearful times?

1:1-4, 11, 18, 27

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.”

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.

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.

If you’ve parked in the Hanley garage at any point since early January, it is possible that you’ve met our two eager-to-greet-you dogs: Reggie and Tory. These two are certainly part of our family and are loved as such, sometimes with quite a bit of consternation.

Reggie is a Brittany Spaniel, too smart for his own good, who often uses his smarts to escape. On Monday night about dusk of this week Reggie decided to go on a walk about in St. Louis, to explore town a bit. So we walked and we drove, calling Reggie’s name, calling him back, in pursuit of our lost beloved furry family member. As you can imagine, there were LOTS of tears and fears. Is Reggie OK? Will we ever see him again? Is he somewhere warm? Can we do anything else, call anyone else to pursue and locate our family member? After several hours, late into the night, we had to come home, and with broken hearts give ourselves more fervently to prayer that our lost family member would be found.

It seems to me that our pain at the loss of our beloved family member pales in comparison to the pain and anguish over our Father’s call and pursuit of this lost world and of us as his children. But that is what we hear in Isaiah 1: a Father calling out to his lost children, but not only calling out, but pursuing, coming after us at GREAT cost, to recover and redeem his children. That is the kind of God and Father he is, a pursuing Father.



That, I think, captures the essence of this this magnificent book. Let's look more closely.

God our Father

Look again at v. 1. **The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz**, which he saw...It is a vision. Isaiah saw it. What does that mean?

Human delivered—rooted in a historical person's experience, Isaiah, son of Amoz. He saw it, lived to communicate it, clothed in human personal experience. This helps us relate to what happened. But also, it is **God-delivered**. This is in reality God's vision, delivered through Isaiah. It is not simply a story about people; this is the story of what God does to gather together his people. This is a story about a wandering people in desperate need of a Shepherd and how He is provided in Jesus.

Further, note the particular how our relationship is described. **V. 2, Children I have reared and brought up who have rebelled.** There is a violation of an intimate relationship, the parent child relationship is broken and shattered. Even animals as dumb as an **ox or a donkey, v. 3, know their master, but my people, my children, do not understand.** God's father heart is set on display; here is the anguish of children who are lost, by whose sin and disobedience have wandered from the household and have become different, losing that sense of family identity. God's heart is grieved over his lost children.

This is important for us to grasp because Isaiah is about the recovery, the redemption, of that relationship. God pursues broken and rebellious to make us his own, and grow us to have a family resemblance to him before a world that is watching.

What that means is we are going to get to peek into the "why" behind some of God's work: the heart of God our Father revealed for his people—from his perspective. If you want to know more of the what—the events, look at 2 Kings 14-20. You get the who and what and where. But for more of the why, or what God's purpose behind all this action is, we need Isaiah. In Isaiah he pulls back the curtain a little to enable us to see what is REALLY going on, a manifestation of his heart that drives what he does, a true vision of his rule beyond what we might understand simply by observing the events.

God doesn't often give us the why, or the purpose behind his work other than the bedrock truths that he is good and loving. Often we are left wondering, trying to piece it all together—how do these events, happenings fit into my life? Is there a purpose? What is God up to? He may not tell us. Yet, when he does, through the prophets like Isaiah, pull the curtain back just a bit and enable us to see, we can trust



that he is ALWAYS at work for the good of his people—even when we struggle to see it.

If you were at Central six years ago you may have heard a bit of my story. My wife of five years had announced she didn't love me, no longer loved Jesus or the church and walked away to begin living the life of an unbeliever. She divorced me and left me struggling to believe God was who he says he is: good and loving. Yet I was thankful for godly elders of a local church to walk with me in my brokenness.

There were also a few friends who walked with me through the recovery from that brokenness. We got together to watch "ER" together on Thursday nights for about a year. My mother came into town during this time of healing and wanted to take out to dinner this small group of friends—Missy was part of the group—to get to know them better and as a way of saying thanks for all they'd done for me. So we went to dinner, then took a walk through the beautiful Central West End where the old fountain used to be. We stopped, and each of us took out a penny to toss into it. Now we all were Christians, so instead of wishing, we prayed. Penny prayers. My prayer was, "Lord would you heal my heart, and one day bring to me a godly wife to spend my life with." None of us discussed our prayers with any other. That was on June 12.

Over the course of the next year, Missy and I began to date and I knew I wanted to marry her. So on June 12, the next year, I took her back to that same fountain where I'd prayed Lord heal and bring me a wife. I told her what I'd prayed there and that I hoped she was God's answer. I asked her and she agreed to marry me. Then she told me what she'd prayed.

At that same fountain a year before, she had prayed "Lord make him whole and make him mine!" I love my wife's boldness before the Lord. When she told me what she'd prayed, it was as if God parted the curtains of history just a bit. He'd been working all this out without any of us being able to see just by watching the events. There he gave us the blessing of his perspective. So thrilled we called my parents to tell them the news. And before we could tell the story, my mother said, "Well, I have to tell you that last year, on June 12, when we all gathered at that fountain and prayed, I asked the Lord to heal my son and bring him a wife who would love him. Now he's done it."

Both Missy and I were dumbfounded. Each of us had prayed essentially the same thing. Surprise, the Lord heard. And now he was giving us just a small glimpse of the extent of his love and care as our God and Father. He rules, and SOMETIMES he pulls back the curtain to let us see clearer all he is doing. Now I know things don't always work out how we want. I never wanted to be divorced in the first place. Every one of us have suffered prayers unanswered, griefs too deep to mention, brokenness that seems never to heal. I know that. But when we do have the privilege of being shown



what God is doing behind the scenes—like he does in the book of Isaiah, the vision of Isaiah—it **enables and strengthens our trust in his work when we DON'T get to see**. God is firmly on the throne, ruling and overruling. And he has the heart of a Father longing for an intimate relationship with his daughters and sons...toward you! If you are his child, trusting in his work, then all that power is turned toward your good.

Pursues.

What chapter 1 introduces to us is not only a God who is a Father, but also a God who pursues his children. His pursuit first of all **shows us our hearts**. We can be: **v. 3, laden with iniquity, v. 21, adulterous and unchaste, meaning, we have sought to be the delight of some other's eyes rather than our Father's, and we are, v. 23, robbers, unjust, ignoring the least and lost among us in widows and orphans, we are in it for ourselves—running after bribes and gifts**. Even, maybe *especially* the leaders are like this.

Our hands are liable to be, **v. 15, full of blood**, meaning a murderous people—at times physically devaluing vulnerable life among us, and at times using our words of slander, accusation, to cut and make others bleed. In our flesh, God is showing us we produce a culture void of life in our rebellion.

Here's the point: it isn't just that we violate some arbitrary laws. Instead, in our rebellion so clearly demonstrated, we turn aside from family resemblance. That's the problem. Our lives don't reflect our Father's life. What we value doesn't reflect what our Father values. The problem is that in our sin and rebellion, our hearts don't look like his heart! As the world looks at the children of God, they see very little of the God who is the Father of these children.

What's more, the people of Judah just like you and I were tempted to carry on as if nothing was wrong. Their worship was exceedingly biblical at their time. **V. 11, they offered rams for burnt offerings, the fat of well-fed beasts, the blood of bulls, rams and goats**. They were doing it right; these were the proscribed sacrifices for a wealthy people. They weren't holding back on their worship. We could say, they sang the hymns, the good ones, robustly. They read the Scriptures in the services; they weren't those who play church by reading some secular poem to feel good. They generously gave an offering when the plate was passed. They were there every Sunday morning! Their worship was lavish and full, and so biblical.

So what was the problem? Why would God say, **v. 11 "I have had enough..." rough translation: I'm sick of it! Why would he say in v. 13, these are "vain offerings," literally "offerings of nothing"**? Because all their "worship" was offered as a cover for a people bereft of repentance. They offered him all kinds of stuff, but withheld their hearts: withheld honest confession, repentance and faith in his work to



cleanse and save. They lived as if it mattered not that they lived it up as children of hell out there, as long as they played “house” with God in here.

And oh, how we desperately need our Father to show us the same lesson. **Let me say it another way: having a dearth of our Father’s character among us reveals a children and a worship that is dead. Having our Father’s character alive among us is revealed in a family and a worship that is alive.**

Now that doesn’t mean we are a perfect people. It means as children we live as a repentant people! Humiliation and conviction does not leave us destitute. When we see the truth it is the invitation to the pathway to life. For part of living in faith and trust is believing that God knows and desires what is good for me MORE than I do. Having his exposure of our hearts is good because it sets us on the path of freedom!

His pursuit also **shows us his heart**. We can’t wriggle away. Throughout chapter 1, God makes his charge. He brings us to the brink of judgment. Just when we hang our heads and say, “You are right. I deserve judgment.” He speaks again, showing us his **heart that desires to cleanse. v. 18.**

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.**

God is saying to us who admit our guilt, condemnation, our shame, “Come to me. Let’s talk about this, you and me. You present to me your blood-stained hands and hearts in confession, red with the death of sin, and I’ll wash you clean, white as snow, in the blood of Jesus.” Though we are riddled with guilt, and covered over with the shame of knowing what we’ve done, that we don’t belong—that we have forsaken family resemblance, he washes us clean, white like wool.

Here’s the thing, though. We will recoil at exposure and hide our bloody hands, UNLESS, we know that our beloved will wash us clean. By his grace, and as Isaiah will later tell us, by his stripes, by Jesus’s going to the cross in our place, taking on himself the punishment, the penalty, the shame, the guilt of MY sin and your sin, by his stripes we are healed. It is by his blood that we are washed clean.

Perhaps you feel exposed, dare I say feel picked on, by the Lord this morning. He put his finger on a part of your life you would rather not see, rather continue to ignore because it causes you so much shame. Hear his voice: Come let us reason, let us discuss this, you and I. Show me your sin, and let me show you my Son who bled for you. His heart is to cleanse, but his heart also is to **reshape us**.



Our Father's pursuit is to begin to redeem and restore that family resemblance, that we begin to look like our Father again, to be children in whose lives the world sees the reflection of our Father. By his Spirit alive within us, he works his character in us, **v. 17, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. And in vs. 25-26, he smelts away the dross and purifies his children.** He saves us to restore us to that family resemblance, to walk in the ways of life! The welfare of the world rests to a very real degree upon how we as God's children reflect his heart of grace and his character of transforming life into the world around us.

You see as his people we not only admit when we sin, but also REPENT, being changed and transformed by his power. The world NEEDS us to be a people of conversion, a people undergoing transformation no longer hiding and pretending, but showing a place to see there is another way! Here the broken, the ashamed, the guilty, the vile can come and be forgiven by the very blood of our God and then set on a path of transformation Are we? Is Central known as refuge for broken sinners, desiring a powerful God to remake us by his grace? Do you enable others to experience your life and your story that way?

I'm happy to report that a good shepherd located Reggie and delivered him to the APA shelter just down Hanley. We picked him up Tuesday morning, a bit tired from his wanderings the night before. Imagine our joy that our lost "child" is home. As Missy later said, instead of driving all over creation calling out to Reggie—who wasn't listening, we should have been calling out to Jesus—because he was listening. He always is listening, pursuing, loving his children.

Jesus is calling. Are you listening? By his blood, you are washed clean. Come, let us reason together and be transformed.