

## Doing Battle With God

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

August 8, 2010

When people share with me that they are angry with God I often encourage them to go ahead and be angry with God - that it's OK – that God's shoulders are big enough to handle it – that God wants us to be honest about what's on our minds and hearts. I do so really out of my own experience – my own sense – that it's true – that God really is big enough to handle our anger – our complaints.

Now, I have to admit that my rationale at times is that it's misplaced anger – that what we need to know is that God pains with us – has compassion for us - that God is not the source of most of what goes wrong in our lives but rather that God cares about how we feel – identifies with how we feel and wants to help.

And so, lines like “Come now, let us argue it out,” like Isaiah offers in this morning's text intrigue me. They further offer me the license to preach, if you will, about the appropriateness of our approaching God with our positions about life that we sense different than God's. But I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. We need to understand a little bit more about what was going on when the prophet Isaiah offered his understanding of God's challenge – invitation - to the people of Judah.

The first verse of the book of Isaiah identifies the time line of Isaiah's prophesying. He notes that his ministry takes place during the reigns of four consecutive kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

King Uzziah's reign was legendary – lasting 52 years. Jotham was his son and Ahaz was his grandson and they each served about sixteen years. Hezekiah reigned approximately 29 years. For the most part all four were seen as good leaders – good people – but the nation of Judah didn't live up to God's hopes for it. They persisted in sinfulness and idolatry.<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah has often been referred to as God's prophet – and it's important to remember that a prophet is not someone who foretells the future – who tells us how it's going to be. Rather, a prophet is someone who tells it like it is – who points out the good and the bad of what is going on. And so, God's prophet lets the people of Judah have it.

It's believed that the diatribe Isaiah offered took place at the temple in Jerusalem. Isaiah described the destruction taking place as Jerusalem was under siege. The rulers and powerful citizens of Judah were gathered in the temple offering their required sacrifice to Yahweh – God – all the while gazing at the destruction at their doorstep and thinking to themselves at least and perhaps giving voice to their thinking: “What have we done wrong?”<sup>2</sup>

And Isaiah let them have it. He didn't mince words. He utilized a little name-calling to get their attention: “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” Isaiah equated those before him with some “of the foulest examples of disobedience and self-destructive self-absorption” in the history of his people.<sup>3</sup> These twin cities of sin had been gone for over a thousand years by this time. Their notoriety was during the days of Abraham. They'd been wiped off the face of the earth by God's cosmic intervention and judgment. And yet, their reputation was so well known in the annals of Jewish history it often was and is used to make a point about wickedness.

But quite honestly, the name-calling wasn't what hurt the most. What really hurt – the real kick in the gut - was Isaiah's comments about God's rejecting their worship. What Isaiah noted wasn't that they were neglecting to worship or that there was something wrong with their worship in the sense of their worshipping something other than God, but rather that their worship wasn't consistent with how they were living the rest of their lives – that there was a disconnect between what they did and said in worship and what they did and said when they weren't worshipping.<sup>4</sup> “You think what you offer me makes up for your lifestyle?!”

Now, before we get too hung up with the problem in Isaiah's day – too hung up with burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts, the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats, of incense, new moon and sabbath, solemn assemblies, etc. - let me offer a translation that contemporizes Isaiah's words – that makes his message and challenge relevant to our experience and thus better able to understand how shocking Isaiah's words were to those gathered in the temple. We might want to ponder God's saying through the prophet Isaiah to us: “I've had enough of your Sunday morning services. I'm tired of hearing your hymns and your praise songs. I won't listen any more to your prayers. Your communion and baptism celebrations are a burden to me. And I hate your Christmas Eves.”<sup>5</sup>

Presbyterian pastor John Wurster offers: “Know anybody whose religion is like that? People going through the motions, people who worship half-heartedly, part-time, with little investment and less intentionality? Folks mindlessly wandering through the rituals, disinterested spectators of a stale drama, who come out of convenience or duty or even habit, but rarely out of expectation or need. Bludgeoned with allegedly pious words and sacred acts, God is pacified, not glorified. Rather than anticipating being swept up by something, someone bigger than themselves, worshipers assemble as if they had some place they'd rather be, as if they were marking off a checklist: God – ‘check.’ Worship – ‘check.’ What's next? Know anybody whose religion is like that?”<sup>6</sup>

And he goes on with: “People who speak all the right words but live all the wrong lives, who make the right appearances for the wrong reasons, who think God can be bought off with a meager gift. ‘Kill a goat, sacrifice a lamb, give a dollar or two. That ought to be good enough.’” “Dress up. Show up. Sit there quietly. That's all God wants. Be sure and get there on the special days. Watch the show. Get up. Go out. Forget about it. Get on with your life.” “Mouth the words. Learn the code. Maintain the façade. Cast opinions and personal preferences in the garb of God's will. Clutch at God like a good luck charm, something to touch superstitiously, childishly to keep bad things from happening. Pretend that outside the sanctuary God doesn't exist. Make believe that what goes on during the week is your own business. Admit no connection between in here and out there. Just as long as you're in your place when the service starts, who cares about what happened since your last visit? Kill a goat, sacrifice a lamb, give a dollar or two – and everything else will be forgotten, right?” “All preaching, no practicing. All talk, no walk. All words, no deeds. All fluff, no stuff. All show, no go.”<sup>7</sup>

It's not that there was anything wrong with the worship going on in the temple – Isaiah's comment had nothing to do with God no longer appreciating people offering sacrifices or being against bloody things in the synagogue – it has nothing to do with there being anything wrong with our style of worship – traditional hymns or contemporary choruses – baptizing babies or Christmas eve services. It has nothing to do with a change in heart about external signs of sacrifice or worship. It has everything to do with the internal – the attitude – and with the external beyond the walls of the church as a result of the internal conversion.

“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

Isaiah puts in the mouth of God those words: “Come now, let us argue it out.” “Come and plead your case, folks.” “Come and do battle with me. You think your worship is enough. You think I’m not concerned about how you live during the week but only about your being present on Sunday morning and your putting some coins in the offering plate, then come into my presence and make your case.”

Now, folks, if you have any doubt about what God’s intention with this invitation to converse is let me assure you that it is primarily about being reconciled with us. Despite the strong name-calling and frank observation about our attempts at worship God’s only intention is to redeem us – to help us live better lives. God’s offer is to make us clean – to reclaim us – to make us whole: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” It’s about being transformed internally.

You see, God is unwilling to give up on us. God wants to give us another chance. God is willing to do battle with us – to converse with us – to hear our positions – because God wants to be in relationship with us. God cares enough about us not to endorse our desires and substitute worship for right living.

Let us pray.

1. David Kalas and Schuyler Rhodes, “The Faith to Let Go,” [www.esermon.com](http://www.esermon.com).
2. Leonard Sweet, [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com).
3. Ibid.
4. Kalas.
5. Ibid.
6. John Wurster, “True or False?,” What If What They Say Is True? (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, 2000), 0-7880-1722-5.
7. Ibid.