

Isaiah 1:1,10-20; Luke 12:32-40
Repairers of the Breach
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What makes for a robust life vision? It's a question we always ask: what am I, what are we supposed to do? The writer of Proverbs warns in chapter 29 verse 18: "where there is no vision the people perish." Vision is important, we can be lost without it. But whose vision? And to what end?

Well if you're looking for vision that goes beyond our culture's rampant individualism and moral ambiguity, you won't be shocked to learn that the Bible offers a clear and compelling vision for human community and flourishing that is worthy of your life. It's God's vision. And the word that is used to describe it is justice. Justice is what a life marked by God's reign and rule, a life where mercy, compassion, peace, and equity are grow and blossom.

When the wider culture looks at what is wrong in the world, followers of Jesus look for what is good and what is hopeful what is redemptive through Jesus Christ. This is called justice.

The roots of Justice take you back to the 8th century BC to the day when Israel had been in a season of prosperity. But they lost track of God in their prosperity. The markets were at all-time highs, the storehouses were full to overflowing, and God's people had grown accustomed to the prosperity they believed was theirs by right. They secured themselves by forming alliances with the warring powers, the superpowers of the Ancient Near East. And these alliances were rather expensive to maintain, they had to pay tribute on an annual basis. It cost them so much that they literally had to restructure their economy and society to meet their obligations. There were unintended consequences.

Instead of being family farmers living in tribal settings, they had to turn to larger scale farming, agribusiness. To do this Kings of Israel gave land grants to people who were well connected so they could farm and produce on a large scale. So, what you had was a wealthy class that began to rise above the rest. The poorer farmers were being pushed down and were no longer able to reap the benefits and provide for themselves or their communities. The people who had, were taking advantage of people who had not. Does this sound strange?

And in the context of this injustice God responds, God sends a prophet named Isaiah to speak to the people about the need to recover justice, and to do so in the heart of God.

This call to return to God, to put away injustice, and pursue God's view of flourishing is what the book of Isaiah is all about. And as is the case for so many places in scripture, God has some harsh words for those who practice *in*justice, and then turn to worship and seek the blessing of God for a lifestyle that keeps others down. Isaiah does not mince words about God's this behavior. In fact the centrality of justice in worship is the very way the book of Isaiah begins.

As I read this morning, I want to warn you, this is a pointedly worded passage. But I want to invite you to listen to it through the lens what we have come to know as God's vision for human communities—then and now.

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.

This too is the Word of the Lord.

It has gone on long enough. Isaiah receives the word from the Lord and it is time to speak. All around him the “faithful” are invoking God’s name in seasons and festivals, and worship that asks for God’s blessing, but their lives and their acts couldn’t be further from God’s heart—the heart of justice.

As I mentioned earlier society had become stratified, and there was a sharp division between those who have, those with power, and the vulnerable powerless. And both, but especially the powerful still showed up to the temple for worship, seeking God’s blessing. They continued to come at the appointed seasons invoking the same God their brothers and sisters—on whose necks and backs they now stood—invoke.

Enough of this, says God. Your incense is an abomination. Your festivals my soul hates, they are a burden and I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, that are full of blood, my eyes will not see, and my ears not hear.

God has a burning heart for his people to experience justice. Isaiah will later say that they are a people who day after day seek me and delight to know my ways as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness. That means that they weren’t living righteously, but they approached God as if they did.

The self-deception is intractable among the Israelites. And those who invoke God’s name and God’s blessing simply ignore what really matters to God. And Isaiah’s not just talking to those who openly persecute, but he’s speaking to those who have fallen asleep at the wheel, who have lost their first love, they’ve lost God’s heart for mercy.

And what Isaiah is saying is that you think by paying God lip-service that God will be flattered by your words, while turning a blind eye to the blatant disobedience to the merciful heart of God. It's something that has been a stumbling block to God's people then and it continues to be so today.

Where do we overlook the righteous call for justice? Where do we say, the Bible is ok for spiritual things that pertain to our souls, but leave the hard work of governing and building an economy to those who know something about politics and economics. And the word of God through Isaiah says: "if you're just going to make it a show of religiosity and individual piety, with no attention to blatant injustice among you, don't even bother God says. I'm not interested."

Then Isaiah recognizes that the people have begun to reason away or make excuses for their injustices. He says, "ok, come let us argue it out. Your righteousness is not enough on its own to cover and atone for the sins. But if you are willing and obedient and bend your life to my mercy, if you are willing to be transformed by the transformative mercy of God then you shall eat in the good land. But if not, if you continue to harden your hearts, you will be devoured by the sword."

It can be very possible to lose track of the heart of God and be part of the problem instead of part of the solution when we lose track of God's healing heart for mercy.

How could we be agents of justice in our world today? First of all it begins by acknowledging that we are helpless recipients of mercy, and to fully take in that reality. We are all beggars, lepers, just holding our hands up seeking the mercy of God.

Bryan Stephenson is an African American Attorney who has become widely known because he has made his life's work of defending inmates sitting on Death Row. He's written a book about it called Just Mercy. He tells of a time when he sat waiting by the phone for a call from an inmate whether or not he received a stay of execution. The call came and the stay was not granted. Bryan was heartbroken, in his mind he had failed. And as he prepared to receive the fear and anger and hostility of the man he'd failed, he was surprised by what he heard from him instead. Through the receiver this man said, thank you and I love you. Mercy, mercy.

Mercy is the thing that keeps us close to the healing heart of God, it's what restores our worship and our work. Justice that is pursued without mercy, without the Gospel at the center, quickly devolves into an indignant and hostile pursuit of just another cause. But when Christ is at the center what we see in each life is the fact that we are all image-bearers who do not deserve and who cannot earn their identity as beloved, but who—each of us—have received the tenderloving mercies of God in Jesus Christ in offering his very life for ours on the cross in the supreme act of mercy. Jesus disadvantaged himself so that we might be advantaged in the eyes of righteous God.

A second way in which we might begin to practice justice in our lives is by taking opportunities to disadvantage ourselves so that others might be advantaged.

For almost 200 years there were an inordinate number of people living on Martha's Vineyard with hereditary hearing impairment. In the 1700s there were a number of families from England who had come and settled there who all had this genetic abnormality, and so because of it an unusually large number of people struggled heavily with poor hearing.

Normally, what people who struggle with deafness have to contend with is accommodating themselves to the hearing world. Lip read, or expensive hearing aids. But on Martha's Vineyard, something unique happened, the hearing people chose to adapt their lives to those without hearing. Virtually everybody on the island learned sign language. Isn't that interesting, on that island the majority disadvantaged themselves for the sake of the minority. And in so doing they created shalom, justice.

If you and I want to be agents of justice, it will mean disadvantaging ourselves, in order to advantage others. The wicked advantage themselves to disadvantage others, but the righteous disadvantage themselves to advantage others. 2 Corinthians 5:21 as I shared in the assurance of pardon says: "he became sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus disadvantaged himself ultimately, so that we might ultimately receive the advantage that leads to eternal life, grace, mercy.

Well if the opening verses of Isaiah 1 are a stark accusation of Israel's injustice and God's distaste for their worship. Isaiah 58 tells of a different future, it offers an alternative view of what life can be like when mercy and shalom are pursued, where people look not first to their own interests, where people make the absurd choice to disadvantage themselves in order to give others a view of the kingdom of God as well. As I close, listen to Isaiah's words, close your eyes and hear the turn from lives that serve only the self, to lives that are characterized by mercy and by justice. Listen to Isaiah 58...

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator^[a] shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or

pursuing your own affairs;^l then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.