

Oct. 20, 2019

Desolation

Isaiah 1:5-9

SOLAS:Vespers

St. John's College

WELCOME

Good evening! Welcome to our second SOLAS:Vespers service for the 2019-2020 season.

Tonight we will move into the second and final part of this opening oracle, and I will warn you right now that this portion is emotionally heavy. Whereas vv2-4 outline the charge God brings against his people, vv5-9 deals with the consequences of their actions: it sketches for us the desolation that foreign armies have inflicted on Judah,

the southern kingdom of the descendants of Abraham; It allows us to glimpse God's anguish as he disciplines his people for their ultimate good; it startles us with its identification of God's covenant nation with the proverbially lawless and long overthrown cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; finally, it suggests a framework for how we should see ourselves.

So, tonight we will go on a somewhat arduous journey, one that will bring us through a dark place, but one that I pray will challenge you and ultimately bring hope, perhaps even more than you know at this moment: on the eve of a national election, bombarded

with messages on all sides, concerned about the future of our country, of all nations, of the planet.

We will sing together. We will hear the Word of God proclaimed and preached. We will hear music that will hopefully bring that Word to life in a vivid and unexpected way. And we will sit together in silence, contemplating Isaiah's message to Israel, and God's message to us: the charges, the verdict, the call to repentance, the word of hope.

SERMON: Desolation (part 1)

"Why would you do something like that?"

If you're a parent, you've probably at least thought those words, if not said them out loud. Having both age and experience, we like to think that we can help our kids by offering them to our kids for their benefit. We hope at least that they might learn from our mistakes.

Of course, in practice, people often insist on making their own mistakes, and we just have to sit by and watch. Sadly, many of us have to bear the anguish of watching the people we love make the same mistakes over and over again. And sooner or later, we find that it has become impossible or at least unwise to shield them from

the painful consequences of their poor habits or decisions.

This is the situation in which Isaiah found himself throughout his prophetic career. From the moment of his calling, he identified himself as “a man of unclean lips”, who lived “among a people of unclean lips”. Coming from a man who was in the know, who had access to the highest echelons of power, who was a royal historian (2Chron26:22) and an astute observer of the human condition, this was a blunt assessment, and a frank admission of his own sinfulness.

With the anguished plea, “Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel?” we pivot in this,

the first oracle of Isaiah’s collected works, from God’s charge against his people to the consequences of their actions. It can be translated more literally as a single question: “Seeing that you will be beaten again, why do you rebel again?”

We may well wonder who asks it. Since biblical languages contain no punctuation as modern English does, translators always have to use context to decide. But the obvious benefits of punctuation aside, punctuation does bring it a certain constraint, a clarity that makes intentional ambiguities in the original languages difficult to communicate. And ambiguity is one of the features that makes poetry poetry.

Though it can make a reader's job more difficult, it is also one of the things that makes poetry uniquely rich as a literary vehicle. It allows the poet to say more with less.

That being said, poetic ambiguity isn't a license to stretch the poet's meaning into whatever shape you might want to give it.

In our passage, the question "Why rebel?" could conceivably be uttered by either Isaiah or by God. The speaker's identity is intentionally ambiguous. Isaiah does this regularly, in large part because Isaiah is self-consciously God's spokesman. This means that what God says, Isaiah says. That is, unless he specifically identifies

the speaker, Isaiah does not intend for us to differentiate between God's speech and his own. It also means that whatever words Isaiah has taken the trouble to record for us, even if he points out that he himself is the one uttering them, likewise accord with God's purposes.

Still, if Isaiah is the one posing the question, there is a different set of implications than if God is asking it.

Uttered by Isaiah, a human being with necessarily limited understanding, the question "Why rebel if you know you're going to suffer for it?" is rhetorical. It is intended to point out the absurdity of his people's rebellion (and remember, he counts himself

among their number). To a human being the question has no easy answer because to us the answer to the question of why we do what we do is ultimately mysterious.

So, in this understanding of the question, what follows is not really an answer. Rather, it is simply a description of Israel's situation using a vivid diagnostic metaphor: "the whole head is sick, the whole heart faint." Typically, in Isaiah's metaphorical world, the head refers to leadership. So, "the whole head"—Judah's king and his advisers, the noblemen, the military generals and other "mighty men" in the chain of command, the temple priests, the elders—all are

assessed by Isaiah. And he declares them all "sick".

And what of the "heart"? Generally, in the Bible, the heart is understood to be seat of the will, and certainly this fits the context. But also, if we look back to the beginning of this oracle we see Isaiah pairing the "heavens" and "earth," and peeking ahead to the beginning of the next oracle, we see a similar pairing, addressing first the "rulers" and then the "people". These pairs form expressions of completion. The heavens and the earth includes everything. The rulers and the people include everyone. The head and the heart encompass the whole person, metaphorically speaking. So here

Isaiah wants to invoke a holistic perspective: our entire inner life. Accordingly, Isaiah tells us that the heart exhibits the symptoms of the head's illness. The "whole heart is faint". The soul sickness of the leaders makes the entire body weak-willed, indecisive, spineless, impotent.

"From the sole of the foot even to the head" is an idiomatic phrase that conveys something similar to the grouping of head and heart, meaning *entirely*, something like our "from top to bottom", or "from stem to stern". We find a very similar expression in the description of David's son Absalom in 2Sam14:25, "from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head, there

was no blemish in him." Here, about Judah, Isaiah says: "from the sole of the foot even to the head, *there is no soundness in it*". Isaiah is reiterating that there is no part of Judah that is unaffected by the terminal condition in which it finds itself. And now he returns to the implicit violence with which he framed his question, "Why will you still be struck down?" All the Hebrew words he uses here are typically used of injuries incurred from blows. What the ESV renders as "bruises" is literally slash wounds, "sores" is lacerations, and "raw wounds" are those that are so fresh that they still seep with blood.

Finally, in Isaiah's metaphorical description we see that the mortal affliction of Judah remains untreated, unaddressed. Their wounds are "not pressed out, bound up, or softened with oil". They are like someone who is sick but refuses to see a doctor.

...

On the other hand, if the question "Seeing that you will be beaten again, why do you rebel again?" is asked by God, another set of implications is raised. It is still a rhetorical question, yet it is more than that, because the questioner has a firm grasp on the answer. He is—by definition—sovereign over our actions. He is the only one who understands with any

degree of precision how his will and ours interacts. And so, with God as Questioner, the enumeration of his people's particular ailments is not only descriptive, but theological, not merely metaphorical, but metaphysical.

Why does Judah, from top to bottom, or for that matter why do we, without exception, rebel against God, even though we *know* that it is not only morally bad to do so, but bad *for us*? God replies that: our "whole head is sick"—each one of us. Our "whole heart" is "faint". We are rotten, from stem to stern.

So at the outset of his book, when Isaiah's purpose is to frame in broad,

general terms the problems that he is going to deal with throughout, he establishes his parameters with a diagnosis the universal condition of the human soul. It is what the old theologians called “total depravity”. This means, not that we are as bad as we possibly could be, but that our sinfulness has terminally infected every aspect of our being. It has impaired our judgement to the extent that we cannot hope to fix ourselves. It has weakened our will to the point that the desire to do so comes only fleetingly. And it has blinded us so that without help we can’t even appreciate the gravity of our situation. We are bleeding out at the side of the road,

not even knowing enough to cry for help.

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Our internal condition sketched out, Isaiah moves on, from the metaphorical to the literal, to a political and historical portrayal of Judah that he witnessed with his own eyes: the desolation of the land and its cities by foreign invaders.

A quick side note may be necessary at this point: in his use of the word “foreigners” Isaiah is not being xenophobic. He uses the word “foreigner” to mean those who come from afar for the express purpose to conquer, to subjugate, to destroy, to

terrorize, and to plunder. The Hebrew Scriptures made ample provision for Gentiles whose desire was to join themselves to God's chosen people. But these were typically referred to as "sojourners", not as "foreigners".

While we're already on a bit of a tangent, I'd also point out that in this short description of Judah's devastated countryside, the last 6 words form what scholars call a "palistrophe". A palistrophe is one of Isaiah's distinct literary forms, kind of like a palindrome, but at the level of words, not of letters. It is one of those literary devices (which I spoke about at our last service) that occurs throughout the book, lending support

to the obvious contention that the book makes about itself: namely, that Isaiah wrote all of it. For more on that subject, you can find my comments from last time on the website: solasvespers.org.

In this palistrophe, the Hebrew word *zarim*, rendered as "foreigners" in our translation is repeated at the beginning and the end. The next word and the next to last word are the verbs that describe the destruction: the foreigners "devour", and they "overthrow", and these verbs enclose the word at the heart of the matter: *desolation*.

And here is the point to which Isaiah has led us in this first oracle, the

message which Isaiah called heaven and earth—which he calls us—to witness: *desolation* is the inevitable outcome of rebellion against God. That is, to rebel against the LORD, to forsake him, to despise him, to indulge our depraved nature, is to welcome the desolation of our world. Initially, only our inner world may experience it, but eventually our outer circumstances conform to the inner reality. *Desolation* is the inevitable outcome of rebellion against God

The 20th century Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn was one of the world's most compelling historians. He served as a commander in the Red Army during WWII, and was interned

in the Soviet gulag system for the better part of a decade, about which he wrote in his two most influential books: *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago*. A Marxist turned dissident, he suffered greatly in his lifetime: in addition to a cancer that nearly killed him since it went undiagnosed during the time of his internment, for most of his life he was a target of the Soviet secret police, the KGB. First they poisoned him with ricin. When that was unsuccessful, they engaged in a campaign to isolate and publicly smear him. They harassed and tormented him for decades, even after he had been expelled from the country and

stripped of his citizenship. They only stopped once they were convinced that he had been sufficiently marginalized in the public imagination.

In 1983, he was awarded the Templeton Prize, and offered this distillation of his life's study:

More than half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: “[People] have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.”

Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our Revolution; in the process I have read

hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: “[People] have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.”

What is more, the events of the Russian Revolution can only be understood now, at the end of the century, against the background of what has since occurred in the rest of

the world. What emerges here is a process of universal significance. And if I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire 20th century, here too, I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again: “[People] have forgotten God.” ...

Among the global intelligentsia of the 20th century, Solzhenitsyn was obviously an outlier. You may even find yourself scoffing at the seeming naivete of his analysis.

Solzhenitsyn's contemporary and compatriot Dmitri Shostakovich, likewise did not agree with this perspective. He was also tormented by the Soviet system, but he did not turn

to faith. Rather, like most serious artists, he exalted art as the only thing worthy of his devotion, and developed the bitter view that “death is all-powerful” (cf. Symphony no. 14). Nevertheless, the two ran in similar circles. The composer admired the author’s literary gift and his courage even as he resented his piety.

Though they fell out because Solzhenitsyn vehemently rejected his conviction that “death is all-powerful”, Shostakovich could never bring himself to surrender happily to death’s chilling embrace.

No, as much as he may have consciously worshipped art Shostakovich’s music betrays a deeper

knowledge: that art serves an even higher purpose, higher even than beauty, which is truth. Thus, as an honest, first-class artist, Shostakovich could not help but bear witness to the desolation he experienced, “the horror”, as Solzhenitsyn put it, “perpetrated not by some outside force, not by class or national enemies, but within each of us individually, and within every society.”

In a moment we will play Shostakovich’s 8th String Quartet, quite possibly his most personal, most truthful, work in which he lays bare his own desolate soul, a work which epitomizes the great Russian pianist and conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy’s

assessment of him, which could be applied equally well to Solzhenitsyn, or for that matter to the prophet Isaiah. He “sublimated his personal experience to the level of universality.”

Because of the power of this work, because of the subject matter of the evening, we will approach this music with great care: I will pray, and then the musicians will assemble, and then I’d ask you to observe a minute of silence. The piece is about 20 minutes long. Afterward we will reverse this process. I’d ask you to refrain from applause, and observe silence, then the musicians will resume their place in the congregation and I will pray

once more before I continue with the final portion of tonight's sermon.

Shostakovich: String Quartet No. 8

SERMON: Desolation (part 2)

Desolation is the inevitable outcome of rebellion against God. Initially, only our inner world experiences it, but eventually our outer circumstances conform to the inner reality. This is the message, this is what Isaiah feels that it is most important to tell us at the outset of his book.

But here it is important to note that we must treat Isaiah's message with care. Though in general rebellion surely brings desolation, there is usually not

a one to one correlation between something bad that happens to us and some sinful behaviour we have engaged in. This is because God is extraordinarily merciful. He is, as the apostle Peter put it: "patient toward [us], not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2Pet3:9) God even risks being thought of as unjust in order to extend his mercy to all. (Rom3:25)

In John 9 we read about an instance in which Jesus was asked explicitly about the circumstances that led to a man's being born blind. If you have a Bible, you can turn there for a moment. (Read John 9:1-3)

“Who sinned?” Jesus’ disciples asked him. Jesus’ answer reveals that they were asking the wrong question. If you read his response carefully, you see that Jesus did not directly answer their question regarding the *cause* of the man’s blindness. He was concerned rather to point out the *purpose* of the man’s affliction: that “the works of God might be displayed”, and not just that they might “be displayed” but displayed “in him”. That is, in the man. Jesus’ interest is in God’s glory and in the man’s good.

The implication is that unfortunate circumstances happen for a myriad of reasons, most of which are beyond our ability to discern. Often, we can’t

perceive the *cause* of our suffering, but always the most important thing is to consider God’s *purpose* in our suffering. Putting it another way, if God asks through Isaiah, “Why will you still be struck down?” it certainly bears asking ourselves, who is the one striking us, and why?

Another time, and this is recorded in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13, Jesus refers to two seemingly pointless tragedies: a situation of murderous abuse by the king, Herod, and the disastrous collapse of a tower that killed 18 people. Seeking to make sense of it all, the general assumption was apparently that those miserable wretches must have done something

to deserve their misfortune. Jesus makes clear that their sin was no greater than anyone else's. Rather, he turns the tables on this self-satisfied and insensitive perspective, turns the tables on *us*, saying, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (13:1-5)

In other words, any time bad things happen, it is entirely appropriate to lament, just as Isaiah does, just as God himself does. But it is equally important to consider God's purposes. Faithful lament includes the consideration of our own rebellion and the desolation that inevitably follows it, even if the connection to the current situation is not obvious.

Faithful lament includes the consideration that God is ever accomplishing his purposes.

And indeed, this oracle of desolation does include such a silver lining.

“...the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field,” Isaiah tells us, a vivid picture of the little temporary shelters that farmers used and then left sad and abandoned in their fields after harvest. “...the daughter of Zion is left...like a besieged city.” In other words, she is cut off from any support, any supply lines. She is, seemingly, on her own.

And yet, while she *is* left, she is *left*. That is, she is still standing. The “LORD of hosts”, Isaiah says through tears, has “left us a few survivors”. His people have not been extinguished. God’s purposes have not been abandoned.

His promise still stands. Just as we saw last time that estrangement between God and his people is answered later in the chapter with God’s gracious invitation: “Come, let us reason together,” so their desolation is answered by the reiteration of God’s ancient covenant promise to Israel: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.” (v19; cf. Deut28:1-14))

Once again, in this first chapter, this overture, this introduction to his broad themes, Isaiah offers a glimpse of one of his main preoccupations: the redemption of humanity, and of all of creation. The road to that redemption runs through the cross, through Isaiah’s vision of the Suffering Servant: “from the sole of his foot even to his head” you could say, his appearance was astonishing, “...marred, beyond human semblance”. (52:14)

And, Isaiah says, just as we sometimes assume that those who are suffering somehow deserve it, so “we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God”. (53:4) Yet, whereas we deserve our bruises and bleeding wounds, “he was pierced

for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities”, whereas there is no soundness in us, whereas our sores (*habburah*) are lethal, “with *his* stripes (*habburatow*) we are healed”.

And this road that wends its way through Isaiah 53 ultimately leads us to the end of time, where we find that the formerly forlorn daughter of Zion, once “desolate”, is now “married”, once “forsaken, is now “delighted in” (62:3-4), surrounded by “all who love her”, surrounded by her nursing children, (66:10-12) in the new heavens and the new earth (65:17).

But we live in the time in between, after ch. 53, and before ch.66. Jesus, the Suffering Servant has come, but

we can still choose to rebel, still choose desolation. And we all do.

For there is a competing narrative to the one we find in Scripture, a narrative that is ever present, a narrative that has always seemed eminently more sensible, eminently reasonable. Instead of listening to a God we cannot see (that is, instead of listening to the words of some prophet out of step with the times, or paying attention to some irrelevant old book) we are at all times far more inclined to pay heed to our own mind, to privilege the evidence of our senses. But these, our mind and senses, were never intended to be used on their own, but

rather to be subject to a higher authority.

The Bible's narrative starts with God, and goes on from there, with his good Creation and his gracious revelation to us, bearing us up in our darkest moments, and leading us to a new heavens and earth. This has always been hard to believe. "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." No less than Jesus said that. (Matt7:14) And indeed, the followers of this way have many times dwindled to a very few. A remnant. But the LORD of hosts, the God of infinite resources, always leaves us a few survivors.

The human narrative starts with us, and goes on from there, with a foolhardy search for a God we cannot perceive, his absence seemingly confirmed by our darkest moments, and leading us to a tyranny of pride and eternal desolation. This has always been the attractive, the broad path. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death," is how the book of Proverbs puts it. (14:12) There is never any shortage of people who endorse this supposedly common sense narrative. Because we are all totally depraved, even those of us who have professed our obedience, our willingness to accept the Bible's narrative, continue

to make rebellious choices. For us too these result in the desolation of our earthly lives: the desolation of our bodies, the desolation of our families and relationships, the desolation of our churches and institutions, the desolation of our culture, the desolation of God's Creation. For the fact is, we are still in the in between, and the poor choices all of us make will affect the world in which we live.

Nevertheless, those who choose to reject the Bible, who choose to reject the word of Isaiah, the spokesman of God, who choose to believe the competing, human narrative about the world, choose the path of rebellion that ends in neverending desolation. A

perpetual loop: the reality to which the eighth quartet of Shostakovich points. Horror, anger, regret. Isolation. Endless grating, tuneless disintegration.

But we *are* still in the in between. We still have time to choose. We can choose, as Solzhenitsyn did, to be willing, to be obedient. As he said: "*All attempts to find a way out of the plight of today's world are fruitless unless we redirect our consciousness, in repentance, to the Creator of all: without this, no exit will be illumined, and we shall seek it in vain.*"

God always preserves a remnant. Will you be one of the few?