

Help!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Dear friends, the season of Advent that we begin again today is like Lent a penitential season. It's a time set aside to look deep within and behold the corruption that runs throughout our minds, bodies, and spirits precisely so that we despair of ourselves, fear God's wrath, and cry out as in the collect for today: O Lord, come, and rescue us from the threatening perils of our sins! The trouble, of course, is that such brutally honest self-examination is painful. And pain is something most of us want to avoid at all costs. This leads us to come up with various dodges to conceal the hard truth about ourselves. And that takes us to today's Old Testament lesson.

There we hear a cry for help from the prophet Isaiah on behalf of the people of Israel. They are in a terrible bind with their enemies oppressing them on all sides, and Isaiah is calling on the Lord for help. And I have to say that Isaiah gets pretty creative when describing what caused the problem they're in *and* in what he suggests as the solution. Oh, he gets to it eventually and manages to tell it like it is; but first he goes through several rounds of what we might describe as "circumlocution", that is, talking around the issue because he's reluctant to call it what it is; namely the guilt of sin.

No doubt you've experienced this when dealing with people. I used to run into it all the time in the Army. I'd ask something like, "Sgt Smith, why isn't your bulldozer up and running?" "It's dead lined, Sir. It won't run." "Can you be more specific, Sergeant?" "The engine, Sir, it's completely burned up." "That's terrible! How'd that happen?" "Sir, basic preventative maintenance procedures failed to be completed prior to the equipment's last mission, Sir." "I see. And just which basic preventative maintenance procedures were not performed?" "Sir, engine oil levels were not checked to ensure they were within proper tolerances." "Go on." "Yes, Sir: Because fluid levels were critically low and were not brought to within minimum operating specifications, excessive friction caused the engine to overheat and seize up, thus causing the damage." "Uh huh ... and who was supposed to check the engine oil level, Sergeant?" "Sir: that would be the responsibility of the dozer's primary operator, Sir." "And who's that?" (He pauses for a moment to study the papers on his clipboard) "... Um, that would be *me*, Sir."

Yes, sometimes it takes a lot of effort to get to the simple truth. This is especially true when we are dealing with the problem of human sin. And Isaiah, speaking on behalf of the people of Israel is playing the same game. But we need to understand that he speaks for all of us – because we all do it. We don't like to admit our failures. We try to cover up our misdeeds. We find excuses or attribute to ourselves noble motives for doing what we know is wrong. We find somebody else to blame. We've got any number of other ways to dodge the issue; but all such evasions are designed to avoid the cold, hard truth: we've fallen and we can't get up. It's not just a hard floor we've fallen on; no we're down in the much deeper, darker pit of our own guilt. And until we recognize the problem for what it is and call it that, and realize that we're really, truly stuck down here without any hope of climbing out ourselves, we're not going to be able to call for the help we need. With this in mind, let's look over Isaiah's appeal to the Lord and see how, by circuitous steps, he finally arrives at the truth.

You'll notice that he begins by calling on the Lord, identifying him both as Father and Redeemer, so he's off to a very good start. Calling God "Father" emphasizes that he is our Creator and Sustainer, the One who gave us life and preserves us day by day. It speaks of his authority over us. It also highlights the *family* relationship we have with him. We aren't merely

his creatures; we are his *children*. As such, it suggests that the Lord has a duty to take care of us. And calling God “Redeemer” emphasizes that he is our Savior, the One who gets us out of trouble when we’re in it. And the idea of redemption hints at the fact that there’s a cost to him in getting us out of trouble. He’s not just rescuing us; no, redemption conveys the idea of buying us back with some kind of payment. So, like I said, Isaiah is off to a great start here. He’s recognized that we need help and that nothing short of divine intervention can deliver the sort of help we need – and he’s turned to the right guy to ask for it.

But then he goes on, “Why, O Lord, did you make us wander? Why did you harden our hearts so that we did not fear you?” It would seem that Isaiah believes the best defense is a strong offense because here he blames the Lord for making the people fall into sin and rebellion. And though it seems to be a pretty audacious accusation, I think we’re all guilty of this at times. After all, we are inclined to think, “The Lord knows how weak I am, if he didn’t want me to sin, then he shouldn’t have made sinning so appealing to me.” There’s a certain amount of logic there. If you don’t want your dog to eat the meat you’ve taken out of the freezer to thaw for supper, don’t leave it lying in his food dish and tell him, “No. Don’t eat that.” When he does eat it, you’ve only yourself to blame. The problem with this line of reasoning, however, is that we aren’t dogs. We are people in whom dwells the Spirit of the living God; and though the Lord does indeed test us at times, he has promised never to test us beyond what he’s given us the ability to withstand. We can’t blame God when we give in to temptation.

But perhaps there’s more to Isaiah’s accusation, something along these lines: “When we started to wander, you should have stopped us, Lord. Our sin is your fault because you didn’t rein us in.” This is what I call the “Homer Simpson defense”. There’s an episode in which Homer is about to do something he knows is wrong and he lays down this challenge: “If I’m not supposed to do this, then let God strike me down!” When lightning doesn’t strike, he presumes he has the Lord’s approval to proceed. I’ve noticed that children, soldiers, and even pets do the same thing. They always want to test the limits of the regulations, and from time to time they’ll check to see if the old boundaries that were once established are still in place. When children do it, it’s sort of a challenge to the parents. The thought is, “I am about to step over the line. Will you stop me now like you used to, or are you going to let me get away with it this time?” Now, the child understands that as he or she matures certain restrictions are lifted – especially those that were established for safety reasons. For example, a toddler is not allowed to go near the street. The parents react immediately if the child even gets close; but as he gets older, he’s taught how to cross safely. Then the parents don’t mind. But other times when an old rule is challenged, the parents don’t intervene because they *approve* of what their child is doing, but rather because their child is growing, assuming more responsibility, and having to make his own choices – even the bad ones. Then he has to suffer the consequences. And sometimes the Lord treats us the same way. He wants us to mature – even if it means we have to learn lessons the hard way. But when the consequences of our bad choices fall, it’s a mistake to then go back and blame the Lord for our straying. We know what the standards are, and we know it’s wrong to take the Lord’s patience and forbearance as approval of our sinful actions.

Isaiah seems to sense the many weaknesses in his line of argument of blaming the Lord for our sin, because then he shifts to a different one. Now he says, “Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance.” How do you like that? “We wandered away from *you*, but now it’s *your* fault, O Lord, that you’re so far away. Come back and rescue us because we are precious to you.” This line of thought is even more audacious than the first; but again, I think sometimes we use it. When we’re suffering the consequences of sin, we often accuse the Lord of being distant – he feels so far from us. Never mind the fact that we’re the ones who made him distant by running away in the first place.

But at least here we're getting closer to the answer because it recognizes that now that we're in this mess, only the Lord can get us out of it, and that we are indeed precious to him. And so what Isaiah asks for is some kind of spectacular rescue. He says to the Lord, "Rend the heavens and come down. Let the mountains tremble before you!" And with this suggestion, Isaiah recalls the impressive showing the Lord made during the Exodus when he came down from heaven and saved his people from their slavery in Egypt with mighty miracles and dramatic displays of his power. And pregnant, perhaps, in this plea is the idea that if we *got* such a show of divine power, we'd be more faithful in the future. I'll hear this from time to time: "I'd be a faithful follower of the Lord if only he'd do some spectacular miracle for me to see." But, you know, it didn't work with those who saw those spectacular miracles at the time of the Exodus. Remember that of all the adults in Israel who saw them, only two didn't lose heart when their faithfulness was later challenged. All the others forgot the lessons of what they'd seen.

Beyond that, Isaiah is still failing to see or describe the situation as clearly as he should. He claims that the Lord is far away and that we need to see some kind of proof that he is acting on our behalf. The truth is that the Lord is already intervening visibly. He's doing it through the terrible circumstances that the people are experiencing. It's his hand of discipline on them. This is something to remember when we experience hard times. They are not indicators that God is far away – exactly the opposite is true. He uses the trouble he sends to make us examine ourselves in order to bring us back to him. Through hardship he draws us closer. If he were truly unconcerned and far away, we'd never experience trouble when we sin and wander from him. He'd just let us go.

But Isaiah has been getting warmer. And I think he really has a breakthrough when he says to the Lord, "You come to the help of those who gladly do right and who remember your ways." Ah, now we've hit upon it: We're suffering terribly. You always help those who are faithful; but right now, you don't seem to be getting us out of this mess... oh, wait, maybe that's the problem: you're not helping because *we're not being faithful*. The problem is with us, not with you. Now he's got it. This is why I like so much the confession of sins we have in the Compline service that we use during Lent. In it we confess to God, "I have sinned in thought, word, and deed by my fault, my own fault, my own most grievous fault." That's telling it exactly like it is. It leaves no room for shifting the blame or finding excuses. And Isaiah, who's come to the same place, now takes it even a step further: "We've become like one who is unclean", he says, "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags." He understands that it's not just the things we do that are obviously bad that are the problem, but also those things that we do that we think of as good. Because we are sinful and corrupt through and through, everything we do is also corrupt. Our great achievements, the ones we're proud of and that we think the Lord should be pleased with only look good to us because our spiritual sight has failed. If we could see what we offer to God with these hands from his point of view, we'd know that what we think of as wonderful is in fact dripping with black, slimy filth.

But this brings us to the crisis point: We're in the dark pit of sin and its consequences and we deserve to be here, we can't get out, no one is doing anything to seek or please the Lord, and those who are trying are only fooling themselves and digging themselves in deeper ... "How then can we be saved?" Isaiah asks. And having now arrived at the true nature of the problem, he's finally able to see the solution. "O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hands." He's saying a lot more here than, "We are what you made us, Lord." No, he's deliberately turning back to the time of creation, when God formed the first man from the dust of the earth. The word used there actually describes a potter at work with the clay. So what Isaiah is saying is that in order to save us, the Lord is

going to have to come down like he did then – come right down onto the earth and join us in this muddy pit of sin we're in. He's going to have to get up close and personal – and roll up his sleeves as he did at first and get his hands dirty with our filth. And then he's going to have to reshape us in his image as he did then. He has to recreate us. And when he's done with that, he's going to have to breathe his Spirit into us like he did at first. It has to be a complete and total new beginning. *That's* what it's going to take to save us.

And that, as you know, is the whole theme and direction of the season of Advent that we begin today: that we stop with all the evasion and side stepping of the guilt of our sin, and stop trying to blame God and others for the mess we've made of things. We've got to see the problem for what it is, name it accordingly, and cry out to the Lord for help. Only then we can see the kind of help we really need: the help by which God comes down and joins us in this filth and slime in the person of Christ Jesus the Son, how he appears not with great and spectacular miracles, but rather by taking this sinful corruption on himself and appearing in humility in a Bethlehem manger, on a bloody cross, and now here in his Word, in the water of Baptism, and in his Body and Blood given for us. Through these he is even now with us in the pit, touching us, cleansing us, reshaping us, and reforming us in the image of him who came down to redeem us. And with these he is breathing into us his Holy Spirit than enables us to live as his children in time and eternity. May this be the help we seek from him now, throughout the season of Advent, and until Christ comes again in glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!