

This Sunday's texts:

Isaiah 29:11-19
Ephesians 5:22-33
Mark 7:1-13

Heart for God
Pastor Jim Cords
August 22, 2021

The holy gospel for today comes to us from the Gospel of Mark, the seventh chapter:

One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. They noticed that some of his disciples failed to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. Similarly, they don't eat anything from the market until they immerse it with their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to such as their ceremonial washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles.

So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, "Why don't your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony."

Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote,

These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
Their worship is a farce,
for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.

For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition."

Then he said, "You skillfully sidestep God's law in order to hold your own tradition. For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father and mother must be put to death.' But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.' In this way, you let them disregard their needy parents. And so you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition. And this is only one example among many others."

The gospel of the Lord. As I read the texts and reread the texts and studied them and then read them again, I found myself on a less direct journey in my understanding of the texts this morning. And I think at the heart of it is the heart of God and how God both reveals his heart to us and then encourages us to live according to his grace and mercy and love and values. I saw that in the text and it reminded me of something else.

Especially as I looked at the Old Testament, it talked about the scroll, the word of the prophet being brought to the people, but it was sealed. I remember that as the Lutheran traditions began, there was conflict and debate in the life with the church. Martin Luther had done some deep study of scripture and he had written some of the things he saw about the grace of God and the fullness of the forgiveness that we receive in and through Christ. In that debate, he was asked to recant. He was asked to take back what he said and what he wrote. He said those amazing words. He says, "Unless I am convinced by proofs from the scripture."¹ God's word is the authoritative source for us in the church, especially for us as Lutherans. We have an immense opportunity in these days, unlike maybe any other time in history, to be able to read and understand the Bible, to see how God reveals himself in it, and to see how God asks us to follow.

So when I first read this text from Isaiah 29 and it said these words, "All future events in this vision are like a sealed book to them."² Like a sealed book to them. I'll be honest. When I first read it, I thought it's because they're making excuses. They *have* this book, but they just refused to *open* it. They just refuse to read it. Then as I kept coming back to it, I kept thinking were they supposed to open a book that was sealed from them? Maybe not and can you really expect a person who cannot read to read if you give them something to read? I looked a little deeper and I saw that before our texts, earlier in Isaiah, there's this condemnation of God's people for their moving away from God and for their trusting in their own strength and trusting in enemies to come and partner with them and war. They're not relying on God. The text says that they're going to be defeated. Then I read this again and what I saw in it was devastating. What I saw was that while God's people were going to be defeated by their enemies because they had stopped relying on God, stopped following God, stopped living according to his way, and were living according to their own ways, and he was going to punish them by bringing the enemy armies and allowing them to be victorious over them, the worst punishment was that he was going to shut them off from his word. He was going to seal the scroll. He was going to deafen their ears.

¹ Luther's Response to the Inquisition at the Diet of Worms, April 18, 1521

² Isaiah 29:11

We're just materialistic enough that sometimes we think the first part, the defeat and the loss of the city and the freedom and stuff like that is the really bad punishment, but indeed, it is not. For God to allow them to back away, for God to create that distance between he and them. There's a poignant vocabulary in this text because God doesn't refer to them as "*my* people." He says "*these* people." What a nightmare!

But as is very common in the scripture, he wasn't done. He reminds them that in fact, their hearts are far from him. He reminds them that when they worship the way they want to worship, when they follow their own traditions instead of doing what God asked them to do, that that, in fact, is no worship at all. The text refers to it as a farce and that's kind of a frightening idea. But then as Isaiah goes on, he says this. "Because of this, I will once again astound these hypocrites with amazing wonders."³ He doesn't leave it there. He doesn't say this is forever. He says, in fact, that because they closed their hearts so much, because they stopped looking for God, he's going to *amaze* them again at his goodness and power and wonders.

He even says that "What sorrow awaits those who try to hide their plans from the Lord, who do evil deeds in the dark. 'The Lord can't see us,' they say. 'He doesn't know what's going on!'"⁴ I want to pause at the text right there for a moment because, well, I think maybe we do the same. I think sometimes we live at least areas of our lives forgetting that God is a part of it, forgetting that he's involved in it, forgetting that even in those areas of our lives we're called to bring glory to his name, to reflect his values, to bring the word of his goodness into those relationships and into those circumstances and it's very hard for us to do. And sometimes when we choose to be either especially selfish or demanding, we might even say God doesn't really care about this or God doesn't see this. The text goes on, how foolish, "how foolish can you be?"⁵ This isn't a deist thing that God creates and sets in motion and then walks away. God the Creator is involved in every aspect of our lives. He's connected to all of the things that we think and do. In our confession, when we talk about the lives we've lived and not lived, it's talking about those things we actively done and those things we failed to do that God would call us to do. Or when we think about the children's sermon this morning, it's saying well I know that God

³ Isaiah 29:14

⁴ Isaiah 29:15

⁵ Isaiah 29:16

loves me and yet forgetting the God loves others and calls us out of his love for us to love them too. We just stop short of recognizing that God would be involved in every element of our lives.

We would say things like “He didn’t make me.” This is interesting. “Does the jar ever say, ‘The potter who made me is stupid?’”⁶ By the way, this is one of those places where the NLT is not quite as helpful. In other words, I mean, has anybody ever thought to say God is stupid? I don’t know. I don’t know if we would go that far. The understanding, the wording there really means that we’re saying that God doesn’t understand me. Have you ever gone that far? Have you ever thought God really doesn’t understand my predicament? He doesn’t understand how I feel. Jesus doesn’t really maybe... Jesus is with God after all. I’m not... What can you expect? I’m only human. We start making those kinds of excuses as if God is without understanding, as if God is stupid.

What God is saying in his rebuke of the people of Israel in this time and in this place, and I think what he wants us to hear is that it’s to our own detriment when we think we can figure things out for ourselves, when we think that we’re free to live lives our own way, instead of looking to God’s will and character and revelation and power and presence in our lives. Isaiah goes on to say, “Soon - and it will not be very long”⁷ meaning hang in there. Soon “the deaf will hear words read from a book and the blind will see through the gloom and darkness.”⁸

When I first looked at that early section of this chapter and I thought they’re giving a sealed scroll to someone who says we can’t read it because it’s sealed and we’re asking a person who cannot read to read, I thought that was kind of crazy. Now later on, as God reveals his promise of his revelation, what he’s going to bring back to the people after this punishment is over, when he’s ready to renew and restore, it says the deaf will hear and the blind will see. God can make himself known to us. He can overcome whatever shortcomings we have in order to meet us where we are, to reveal who he is to us. His promise to these people is he will not be gone for long. He will come and they will be able to know and see and understand the truth of who he is. “The humble [it says] will be filled with fresh joy from the Lord. The poor will rejoice

⁶ Isaiah 29-16

⁷ Isaiah 29:17

⁸ Isaiah 29:18

in the Holy One of Israel.”⁹ God will lift his people up. He will fill them anew with life and goodness. He will make himself known and open our hearts and lives to experience his presence, the freshness of his mercy, and his grace.

Jesus, as he dealt with the people, the Pharisees and the religious who were challenging him, said “For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition.”¹⁰ That's interesting. In this book of Mark in chapter 7, where we see Jesus quote from Isaiah in this text, if you look ahead a bit, if you look in chapter 6, what you're going to see is Jesus just fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. Anybody ever done that? Didn't think so. You know what else he did. He walked on water. Any of you done that? Somebody say yes, but it was frozen. Jesus has demonstrated his goodness and his power. He's gone to the people and shared the good news of the gospel and these leaders of the Jews from Jerusalem come and they meet him and what do they complain about? Your disciples didn't wash their hands. I'm thinking. what in the world? What a contrast between the amazing work of God that he's done through Jesus and this nitpicking concern that they didn't wash their hands. In truth, it's worse than that. Because this accusation that the Pharisees and religious leaders are making to Jesus and his disciples is saying this. They're defiled. They're unclean. Because they failed to follow this rule, they should be put out. They bring their defilement to the very food that they eat. Jesus, you ought to be rejecting them.

Now it'll be great if this were just a history lesson and we were learning from it. But here's the truth of the matter. We in the church we still do this. We see certain behavior that doesn't align with our “Christian” behavior and we say ooh, that person ought to be put out. We allow this separation to form. It happens not only in the world, but in the church. It happens not only in the church, but in the family, where we think our right understanding of the scripture is there so that we can judge others and tell them they're out, they're unclean, they're defiled. The truth of the matter is we sometimes even think they don't get back until I decide they get back. Maybe if I decide to forgive them, then it'll be okay. We forget forgiveness is the business of the church. We forget the only reason we're here is because we've received it. We forget that Christ loved us so that we can love others.

⁹ Isaiah 29:19

¹⁰ Mark 7:8

There's a transformation that happens as we rest in the truth of who God is, rather than relying on what we think is best, rather than relying on what we want to do. Too often, too often the truth is we ignore the scriptures altogether. We have this gift from God in which he reveals himself in the Holy Bible and we don't even bother to think about what it says. Or other times, we read the Bible only to challenge what it says rather than to allow what it says to challenge us. You see, the Bible does a couple of things. It reveals who God is and then it also reminds us who we are. And then over and over and over again, it reminds us of the goodness and mercy of God to overcome who we are with who he is.

There's another thing we do in the church, especially here in the West. And I don't mean the west of the United States. I mean the western world. We are masters at compartmentalization. We think of our faith and what we learned in scripture as that affects our spiritual lives and so we read it and we even seek to allow it to transform who we are spiritually, but then we think, well, work that's different. Community, that's different. Exercise, that's different. Diet, that's different. We compartmentalize where we take God seriously from the areas we are actually living in. But when we see Jesus' words today, we see the God's word guides us into all of life. We see in this example that Jesus gives to the Pharisees, he takes it all the way to the basic structure of our lives together. He brings it to the place of family. What the Bible says speaks to how we treat our parents. What the Bible says speaks to how we treat our spouses.

We have this amazing gift in God's word that will, again and again, remind us who God is and even though sometimes it's uncomfortable, it will again then again remind us of who we are, of our struggle, of our brokenness and then finally, it will remind us that God's goodness, that God's mercy, that God's love is a truth that reveals the heart of God and then draws us to him. I encourage you today to not only remember the mercy and love of God for you, but to remember the gift of his word, that can be there to enrich us and encourage us each and every day. To take advantage of this amazing gift we have that allows us to look to the scripture to draw us back to the heart of God and to send us out into the world to bring grace and love through our Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.