

Sermon: A Fearful Thing?

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 2:5-11; Hebrews 10:26-31**

Some time ago, I discovered a book called *The New England Soul* by a scholar named Harry Stout. It's about preaching and religious culture in colonial New England, from 1620 to 1776. What an eye-opener.

Turns out pastors didn't preach just on Sundays. They preached *mostly* on Sundays, but they also delivered sermons on fast days, thanksgivings, election days, and at militia gatherings. A distinction was made between regular sermons preached from a pulpit on Sundays, and occasional sermons preached elsewhere on other days.

Regular sermons relied on the Bible, and preachers almost always delivered a message of personal salvation through God's grace. Preachers told their people how to move toward God through living their daily life. They preached a covenant of grace. And they avoided any mention of politics because that wasn't their job. On Sundays.

Occasional sermons, on the other hand, were preached outside the pulpit. These articulated a national covenant in which the actions of citizens led to either divine judgements or divine blessings for the entire society. They were often very political, but that was expected.

Through the occasional sermon, pastors could proclaim warnings and condemnation if they saw the nation – New England – headed in the wrong direction. And on any given Sunday, they proclaimed God's Word and salvation for sinners through obedience and a saving faith.

We can talk more about this later, but for now, perhaps coincidentally, here we are on a Wednesday evening with the day's lectionary readings that will take us down both roads.

Isaiah very clearly saw his nation headed for disaster. Assyria had already conquered Israel, the Northern Kingdom, in 722 B.C., and Isaiah saw greed, war, and a pagan disregard for God creeping into the culture of Judah, the Southern Kingdom.

The theme and arc of the story, which begins here, move from decadence to justice and prophetic hope, but it takes a long time for the nation to get there and longer still to recover.

The nation as a whole, Israel in the north, Judah in the south, had misbehaved in many ways. Foreign influences and the desire to be like the other nations further eroded the people's commitment to God and living by the covenant. Poor leadership didn't help either.

The bottom line for Isaiah was that the nation needed to stop glorifying itself and turn back to God because time was running out. If you want to have some fun when you get home, and to get an idea of God's mood toward all of this, I invite you to read Isaiah 1:10-20 (below). Spoiler alert: God is not happy.

It's not for nothing that Christians in every time and place have used Isaiah to help shape and guide the faith and life of the church.

Now, linguistically, the passage from Hebrews is very interesting. Understanding how we got to today's translation matters a great deal.

The first major translation of the Five Books of Moses – the Torah – is a Greek translation called the Septuagint, from the late second century B.C. Greek was the language of the Mediterranean even after the Romans took over from the Greeks in about 146 B.C. This matters because the early Christian writers, when they quoted Hebrew Scripture, quite often used the Septuagint. The problem for us is, the Septuagint is not entirely accurate.

The author of what we call the Letter to the Hebrews used the Septuagint when he quoted from Deuteronomy and also when he made an allusion to Second Samuel.

In today's reading, we find ourselves dropped into the middle of a call for the church to persevere. Hebrews is more of a long sermon than a letter. The author is unknown; we don't know anything about the intended audience, but we do know that they were probably second-century Christians who were maybe disappointed that the promised kingdom had not yet arrived.

Read one way, tonight's passage reads like a negative warning against eternal judgement. But is it really? Fortunately, we can find a positive meaning by looking at the original context of the quoted bits from Deuteronomy.

The letter reads, 'For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, *I will repay*.'" And again, "The Lord will *judge* his people.'" Sounds scary.

But the English translation of the original Hebrew in Deuteronomy reads:

'Vengeance is mine, and *recompense*¹,' and, 'Indeed the Lord will *vindicate* his people' (Deuteronomy 32:35-36). There's a big difference between *judge* and *vindicate*. The message in Deuteronomy is 'let it go; it's not for you or me to judge; God is in charge; it'll all work out.'

But the best part comes next.

In Genesis, Jacob falls asleep in ‘a certain place’ and dreams of a ladder going up to Heaven. In the morning, ‘Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How *awesome* is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven”’ (Genesis 28:16-17).

The same word from the Septuagint translated as *awesome* in Genesis comes out as *fearful* in Hebrews. In all the New Testament writings, it’s only found in this letter, here, twice. In ancient Greek, the word can mean *fearful* or *inspiring terror* or *terrible*, or it can mean *awesome*. The difference is that when God is invoked, the word takes on a positive meaning.

Apparently, whoever wrote Hebrews didn’t know this. They used the same word in verse 27 – ‘a *fearful* prospect of judgement’ – as they did in verse 31 – ‘it is a *fearful* thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ – without realizing that, when God is involved, it’s *awesome*.

We can cross-check the allusion to fall into God’s hands as a positive thing against a passage in Second Samuel, where David said to the prophet Gad, “let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great” (Second Samuel 24:14).

It’s passages like this, read literally and not critically, that frighten people away from the Bible and religion. They may still have a yearning for a relationship with God, but this stuff only makes people want to hide from God, like Job.

When people first began to hear about my call to ministry, I’d arrive at some event and some of our less-religious friends would often hide their glass of wine behind their back. Maybe it was just a knee-jerk reaction to the presumably holy person in their midst passing judgement on their sinning, wine-drinking ways. Adults drinking wine at a party is the least of God’s concerns. But then, these same people would sometimes ask me later, “Will I be saved?”

Is God’s judgement a bad thing? Not when the idea is justice. It enables us to let go of any personal desire for revenge and leave it to God.

The colonial preachers knew what they were doing when they separated sermons about the nation’s fate from Sunday sermons about personal salvation and God’s grace. The most important sermons were the ones heard on Sunday morning. Who cared if the nation prospered if you were damned for your sins? People just needed to know how to repent, to be saved.

As Isaiah wrote, let us walk in the light of the LORD – NOW.

Amen.

Isaiah 1:10-20

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.

¹ Make amends to (someone) for loss or harm suffered; compensate.