

God Turns Things Right-Side Up

Proper 16

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Isaiah 29:11-19

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Not long ago in the Epistle text, we learned that we are called not to ignore the works of darkness, but instead to expose them. We expose them to the light.

That is precisely what God was showing the Israelites in our Old Testament text. The Israelites were claiming to have the right religious answer with their mouths, but they were going after the assistance of the Egyptians, even though God was making it clear that the Egyptians would be no help at all. He was exposing that they were not trusting Him at His Word. Why was He doing that? He was exposing that they were in darkness so that they might repent and follow Him.

The world has been in darkness and upside-down since the fall into sin. But we have been called out of the darkness into God's Light in Christ. Does that mean that we no longer sin or make mistakes? No. Does it mean that we should continue on doing what we know is wrong? No.

We find ourselves in the delicate balance of saint and sinner. But again, as saints, we have been called out of darkness, to no longer practice the works of darkness, but instead to trust and follow God completely. But the said could be said of the Israelites. They were called out of slavery by God and commanded to follow Him. Yet once more God will shine the light of His Word to expose whether or not they are listening to Him.

Today, we'll hear how God shines His Word on the works of the Israelites—and us—to show whether we're following Him; and what God has done about it.

Verse 1

God spoke to the Israelites through the prophet Isaiah saying: "(T)he vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, 'Read this,' he says, 'I cannot, for it is sealed.' And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, 'Read this,' he says, 'I cannot read.' And the Lord said, 'Because this people draw near me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men...'"

The Lord makes it clear at the outset of our passage that the Israelites are blind to what He desires. Luther made the connection of this blindness to the veil that was over the Israelites Moses had led. In both cases the Israelites were prevented from seeing the will of the Lord God. They were kept from it like ones wearing a veil over their eyes or without the ability to see. In other words, everything was upside-down for them. They were going one hundred eighty degrees the wrong direction.

To demonstrate this, God makes it clear that while the Israelite leadership was claiming to follow God with their lips, they were ignoring His Word in practice, relying on the assistance of the Egyptians to keep them from the Assyrians, even though God had specifically told them not to.

The fault of this is not God's. His Word could be heard and understood by any of the Israelites. The problem was not with God's Word; it was within the hearts of the Israelites. Their hearts were upside-down.

How many today attempt to draw near to God with their lips? These are ones who make a great show out of worshipping God. They worship with these big shows either to be seen doing it, which is their own reword, or because they believe God commands it. But God does not command sacrifice but obedience—obedience to His Word and His Promise that One would be coming to save humanity. God told Isaiah's contemporary Hosea "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt

offerings (Hosea 6:6).” God wants right-side up hearts, not empty words. And every form of worship trying to gain God’s appreciation or to say that one worships God when one doesn’t acknowledge Him is nothing but empty words. It is as though there is no legitimate faith in God but simply doing actions because that is what one was taught by parents or grandparents or because others are doing it while the one doing it does not truly believe.

Verse 2

“(T)herefore,” God continued through Isaiah, “‘behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.’ Ah, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, ‘Who sees us? Who knows us?’ You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, ‘He did not make me’; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, ‘He has no understanding’?”

Here God promises to show that those who only practice lip service will be shown to have no wisdom or understanding. Sure, they may appear wise in this sinful, corrupt, upside-down world, but in the big scheme of things, they will be revealed to be upside-down, and their wisdom for the folly it is.

There are certainly those today and in recent years who believe that God doesn’t exist—that He is nothing but a made-up myth. They claim that God did not make them but that humanity made Him up. They will be proven sadly mistaken—and what is worse, they don’t care. Some have honestly answered the question “Does Satan exist?” with “I don’t think so, but I guess if he shows up at the end of the world, I’ll be proven wrong...” Certainly there are those today who have the same callous, arrogant attitude regarding God’s existence.

But what is more, there are those who know God and yet do not acknowledge Him. They know He exists but pick and choose which of His Word they will listen to; or they go against His Word when they know better. Again God had clearly said to the Israelites through His prophets not to trust in getting help from the Egyptians, and yet the people chose to listen to the prophets whom God did not send who said to go ahead and trust Egypt’s might. Today, we might be tempted to do the same. Others, or even we, may do this because it is easier; because it sounds better; or whatever the case may be. Whether willingly or unwittingly, the ones who do this call God a liar and turn things upside-down to suit their needs. The ones who do this God has promised to make look like fools.

Verse 3

God said through Isaiah: “Is it not yet a very little while until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest? In that day, the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.”

God shall fulfill all His promises. He sent Israel into the Babylonian Captivity as He promised; and He brought them back out, as He had also promised. Yet even today things are still upside-down. They have been since the fall into sin. But God promised to reverse that as well—and so He has. He has sent His Son to pay the price for our sins, and Jesus has come and died on the cross for our sins—yours and mine.

Today God still calls us to be faithful to His Word and promises because He knows that is the only place where we will be righted in our thinking, and the only place where our sins may be exposed by the light, so that

we might repent of them. Our thinking is still upside-down and so are our actions. It is only in the hearing of God's Word and the receiving of the Sacrament of the Altar that God rights these things.

But these are not acts of lip service. They are acts of faith. To pretend to hear God's Word or to come to hear it only because that's what mom and dad said to do, or because everyone else is doing it, is not what God desires. He desires for you to come and hear and believe. He desires this that you and your life might be made right-side up. But this does not happen by coming to hear the Word or receiving the Sacrament as a practice taught by men but as ones trusting Him at His Word in faith. May God continue to grant that faith to you and to me through His Holy Spirit. In Jesus' Name. Amen.