

## **“Finding God’s Shalom” based on Isaiah 58:1-16,**

**David Jahnke, 8/22/10**

There are three clear historical periods in the book of Isaiah and likely three or more different authors. The first period is in the 700s prior around the Assyrian invasion and exile. And the author from this period is known as First Isaiah. Second Isaiah was written from the mid 500s during the Babylonian exile. And Third Isaiah was written after the return

Not all the Israelites were exiled to Babylon. The Babylonians were interested in the highly educated or highly skilled. Second Isaiah had predicted a great blossoming of life in Israel upon these leaders’ and their children’s return to the promised land. He wrote, “I will turn the darkness before them into light.” (Isa. 42:16b) But their hopes were dashed when they returned to a nation devastated by decades of plundering armies and no centered political or religious life.

It was very hard to turn things around. Even decades after the return, life remained impoverished, rather than abundant. So the question for Third Isaiah became, “Why, O Lord? We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.

The prophet Haggai said the people were too busy pursuing their own interests rather than the re-building of the temple. Self-interest is a problem for Third Isaiah. But he also takes aim at those who take religious observance seriously but who fail to embody God’s justice and compassion in their daily lives.

He writes, “You bow your heads like a reed, you wear sackcloth and ashes and fast. But is not this the kind of fasting God has chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?”

There are two vital components to true religion and healthy communities: 1. loving and worshipping God (which was the focus of Haggai) and 2. loving and caring for neighbor (which Third Isaiah added.) Let me bring this into the 21<sup>st</sup> century through a couple of conversations I had in Montreat. On the one hand is my dear friend who spoke of the struggle to get his congregation moving in mission. They participate fine in the one remnant of

cultic observance we have in 21<sup>st</sup> century Protestantism-- Sunday morning worship.

But my friend says their worship is an essentially gloomy and lifeless endeavor. They bow their heads like reeds and are left wondering why they remain in decline. Just like the ritualistic Israelites, they are asking, 'Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' My friend is helping them to see that worship is not about convention or maintaining God's favor...And that church mission is not just about writing a few thousand dollars worth of checks to send to charities. It is about how we live.

I do not think this has ever been a big issue in our church. When you look at the Food ministries, the Thrift Shop and our work with Homefirst, I would say we are doing quite well when it comes to the fast which Isaiah said God demands-- to share your food with the hungry, to clothe the naked, to provide the poor wanderer with shelter.

A great sign of health is that our hands-on missions have been ratcheted up by the mission committee the last couple years. And we have more opportunities than ever for you and yours to serve the hungry.

On the other end of the spectrum, I heard another young pastor say over breakfast at Montreat, "I know every church says they are mission-oriented. But ours really is...And that now my church is trying to figure out ways to get people to come to in to the church. And she added rather glibly, "I don't really care about that though I would not dare admit it to my congregation." If I understood her and I did not get a chance to ask, she was basically saying, "As long as people are out there serving others and doing good, it does not really matter if they go to church or not!"

I am going to come back to this. Suffice it to say that I have major concerns about this...But the perspective of this young pastor does point out something important— that Gen x-ers and younger tend to be mission-oriented and recognize that religion without social action is impoverished and false.

Isaiah calls the community to one more thing in order to experience abundant life. "Remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, and malicious speech." There was contention in the community.

People were pointing fingers, making accusations, insulting one another, spreading gossip. And Isaiah would not put up with this.

Sometimes God's call to love and compassion is twisted when it comes to unhealthy spiritual elements within our lives and communities. We forget that love also involves judgment and instruction when it comes to bad behaviors.

I still watch the show *Intervention* on Monday nights. And almost every time I watch, there is a family member who drives me crazy because they are an enabler of disease and bad behavior. They have been deceived into thinking that Love demands "helping" their spouses or children. Of course their "helping" only enables their loved ones to continue in the same destructive patterns which have them yoked. The addicts gossip, make accusations and bully their families with insults and threats, especially when someone speaks the truth or refuses to give into them.

The same thing happens perhaps to lesser degrees in most family systems—including churches. Gossip is rewarded with an attentive ear rather than discouraged. Insults about others bring laughter and further jibes. We play the blame game and make accusations and threats.

And family systems put up with this sometimes because they do not have the tools or the knowledge or the strength to deal with it. Sometimes we do not want to call a spade the bloody shovel that it is. We want to be nice; we do not want to make waves. Sometimes we prefer the disease that we know over the change we do not know. Other times, standing up to bad behavior means a battle with a bully which none of us really enjoys.

But just as we must recognize the sin that is within us and say, "Be gone!", the same should be done regarding destructive behavior within our homes and in the body of Christ. We must face it and speak truthfully about the consequences of behaviors. And often times, we cannot even see it when we are a part of it.

I was talking to somebody the other day about how difficult it is to know how we look and sound because we cannot hear or see ourselves. We should have cameras in the corners the rooms where we fight the most. Anyway, not seeing or knowing ourselves is one of the most important reasons we do need to be a part of a worshipping community.

This brings me back to the perspective of my 20-something year old colleague in ministry who does not really care whether people come to her church or not, as long as they are out there doing good. Again, bless her heart for realizing that God's mission is not about getting more people to think like us or join *our* particular church and help *us*. But becoming a part of *a* worshipping community is, I believe, critical to health and wholeness.

Isaiah writes, "Refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day, call the sabbath a delight..."

Without the foundations of God and worship, the natural tendency towards self-interest and self-centeredness gain the upper hand. When we replace God with humanity and the self— when we replace true grace-filled worship and God's mission with good works, then both pride and humiliation, self-righteousness and self-debilitation take hold. We actually move between exalting and debasing ourselves depending upon our level of success and our personal history and make-up. Such wavering creeps in even when we prioritize God and worship in our lives! How clear then is our need for a weekly reminder of who and what this is all about! And a clear perspective on who we are.

Our self-deception and self-ignorance are counter-acted by the blessings of being seen from the outside by community and by God; by being loved unconditionally for who we are; by growing together through mutual edification, including correction and encouragement.

My rant is not yet done. Not caring about a worshipping community basically concedes that things are up to us. And if things are up to us, from where would we find joy, hope and rest? I do not know about you but I get very frustrated at my own efforts to live into the justice and compassion of the Kingdom of God much less trying to help others to live into it...much less transforming our community, nation and world into a place where that Kingdom thrives! Where would our hope come from, when things move so slow or even backwards? What would keep us joyful, when so many are suffering daily, including our loved ones and ourselves? What would provide the energy and motivation to keep on keeping on, despite it all? For Christians, only knowing that all things are in God's hands; and that God calls us to rest, trust and hope in Him and know joy. And also join in His work every other day of the week besides the Sabbath.

This is all about experiencing God's Shalom. We as individuals, as families and as a church can find spiritual health and wholeness through implementing three things: 1. by showing compassion to the hungry and the broken (ourselves included), 2. by removing yokes which keep us locked in unhealthy patterns, and 3. by remembering every week our God and the rest and joy to which he calls us all.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power be to our God forever and ever! And God's people say, "Amen."