

Wash Yourselves

Isaiah 2:1-5

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Advent 1

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

³Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord! (NRSV)

I

Ten years ago the state of Alabama almost took the Bible seriously. Almost.

This remarkable story started in 2001 with a woman named Susan Pace Hamill. Ms. Hamill was (and still is) a professor at the University of Alabama Law School where she taught courses on tax law. In 2001 she was granted a sabbatical that she used to study the Bible at Beeson Divinity School, a conservative seminary also located in Alabama. During that sabbatical year she wrote a paper comparing Alabama's tax laws with the Bible's understanding of justice. She called her paper, "The Least of These: Fair Taxes and the Moral Duty of Christians." In this paper Professor Hamill showed that Alabama's tax laws did not follow biblical guidelines. She pointed out that Alabama taxed the poor at proportionally higher rate than it taxed the rich. She correctly called this an injustice from the Bible's point of view.

The next step in this story happened when the newly elected Republican governor, Bob Riley, read Professor Hamill's paper. Like Professor Hamill, he too was a Christian. And after reading her paper, Governor Riley was convinced that in his role as governor he

was responsible to change Alabama's tax laws to make them more consistent with biblical justice.

Therefore in 2003 Governor Riley developed Amendment One, a legal initiative to reduce taxes for Alabama's poor and raise taxes for Alabama's wealthy. As you know, Alabama is part of the Bible Belt where there are lots of Christians. In fact, 94% of people in Alabama claim to be Christian.¹ Given the overwhelming number of Christians in the state, Governor Riley openly told Alabamians that Amendment One was inspired by the Bible. He urged voters to approve the amendment so that justice would flourish.²

As usual in politics, some people were for it and some were against it. Oddly, and ironically, one of the most prominent groups that opposed the amendment was the Alabama chapter of the Christian Coalition. You heard that right: a prominent, nationally known group of Bible-believing Christians opposed a law based on the Bible. When voting day came, a majority of Alabamians agreed with the Christian Coalition: 68% of voters, most of whom profess Christian faith, rejected the governor's proposal for biblical justice.

After Alabamians defeated Amendment One, Professor Hamill wondered how other states measured up to biblical standards of justice on taxes. So she studied the other 49 states and in 2007 published a book called *As Certain as Death: A Fifty-State Survey of State and Local Tax Laws*. She found that 18 states seriously violate biblical principles in how they tax and spend. The 6 worst offenders, which she calls "the sinful six," are Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, South Dakota, and Texas. These sinful six, she says, make the poor pay a larger share of income in taxes than the rich, while not doing much to improve quality of life for the poor. Only one state's budget and tax policies measure up to biblical principles: the state of Minnesota.³

In a similar study of federal tax laws and the federal budget, Professor Hamill concluded that the U.S. tax code does not satisfy biblical principles of justice either—that it taxes the poor too much and the rich not enough.⁴

This story about local, state, and federal taxes demonstrates that the United States has at least one thing in common with the kingdom of Judah in the 8th century BCE, during the lifetime of the prophet Isaiah. Neither 8th century Judah nor 21st century America treat the poor in the ways God intends.

The first chapter of Isaiah roundly condemns 8th century Judah for injustice. Listen to these words from 1:16-17, and from 1:4:

Give up your wicked ways.

Learn to do good.

Seek justice.

Help the oppressed.

Defend the orphan.

Fight for the rights of widows. (New Living Translation)

You are a sinful nation,

people laden with iniquity,

offspring who do evil,

children who deal corruptly,

who have forsaken the Lord,

who have despised the Holy One of Israel,

who are utterly estranged [from God]. (NRSV)

These are bracing charges that God lays against Judah. The language is stark and stiff. You might be wondering what gives God the right to use such strong words. Upon what basis can God be so blunt with Judah?

The answer is covenant. In the covenant between God and God's people, strong language is allowed. When God's people think God isn't doing what God promised to do, then God's people are welcome to say so directly to God. This is called lament, and we find this mode of strong speech in 67 of the 150 Psalms, in the book of Lamentations, and in numerous other texts scattered in the Bible.

But this strong speech works the other way too. When God thinks that God's people are not doing what they should be doing, then God gets to say so. We find God's

strong speech throughout the major and minor prophets, and in the words of Jesus himself. The Bible demonstrates over and over again that in this covenantal relationship of trust, loyalty, and fidelity, blunt speech happens.

Isaiah 1 certainly has this sort of speech. Judah's injustice toward the poor is so bad that God is fed up with hypocritical worship. Verse 11:

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.

The injustices of Judah so rankle the heart of God that God will not even listen to Judah's prayers, according to verses 15-16:

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.

III

This is the context of Isaiah 2:1-5, our passage for today. In this context of national injustice toward the poor, of flagrant disobedience to the ways of Yahweh, Isaiah shifts from a description of what is to an evocation of what will be. Injustice now pervades Judah, but in the future, God's justice shall pervade the world. Now people reject God, but in the future people will stream to God, eager for God's teaching, yearning for God's justice and peace. "Many peoples" will go to God. A massive conversion will happen. Folks will no longer resist God; they will want God.

In this golden future, nations of the world will finally see that their best long-term interest is to treat the poor justly, because such justice ultimately makes nations strong and vital. Nations will understand that God wants them to welcome strangers from other lands and places, who speak different languages and have different skin tones. And

nations will have abundant financial resources because they will no longer foolishly squander money on armies, navies, and air forces.

This text boldly asserts that the future belongs to God. What the world is now is not what it will be. Isaiah does not say how all of this will happen or exactly when it will happen. But in days to come, by the incomparable power of God, it will happen.

You and I know where the world is headed, yet meanwhile we continue to live in the present with its distaste for the ways of God. In a few moments we will offer you a ritual of handwashing. In Isaiah 1:16, God urges us to “wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes.” So if you wish to repent of your own sin, particularly of ways you have participated in injustice for the poor, you are welcome to this ritual.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Alabama#Religion

² Though Ms. Hamill did not believe Governor Riley’s amendment went far enough, she spoke out in favor of it. See her sermon “Seek Justice” at <http://www.law.ua.edu/susanhamill/hamill-seekjustice.pdf>.

³ David Cay Johnston, “Professor Cites Bible in Faulting Tax Policies,” *New York Times*, December 25, 2007. See also “Unjustly Taxed: The Bible and Politics in Alabama,” *Christian Century*, September 21, 2004, 28-33.

⁴ Susan Pace Hamill, “An Evaluation of Federal Tax Policy Based on Judeo-Christian Ethics,” *Virginia Tax Review* 25:3 (Winter 2006), 671-764.