Isaiah Intro #2  Chapters 1-8

The very first verses of this prophetic poetry help to frame the message of the entire book:

“Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,
but they rebelled against me.”

Prophets are usually the people who go against the flow of the surrounding culture – they intentionally do not fit in, and instead they speak out to say that something has gone wrong. That the system is broken. For Isaiah the prophet, there is an overwhelming sense that God is not pleased with the current state of affairs... the people of Israel were supposed to be those who were set apart to do the will of God, but they have fallen away from their high calling. “Ah, sinful nation! People laden with iniquity! Offspring who do evil, and children who deal corruptly!” The prophet speaks a bold word of correction, to shake the people out of their sleep. It is a wake-up call, a declaration that “life as usual” is heading down a path of destruction.

Isaiah uses shocking, dramatic, over-the-top language and images to make the point extremely clear. In these early chapters, we find a description of a God who is simply furious about the corruption of the people and the land. But a careful reading of the text reveals that God’s fury isn’t directed toward vengeance and punishment, but rather toward restoration. In God’s eyes, the people are very clearly not living the way they were commanded to live. And because the faithfulness of this chosen people is critical to God’s plan for blessing the world, the situation simply cannot remain as it is. This is why we find an expression of righteous anger and wrath. There is too much at stake here to allow things to remain unchanged.

So what exactly is it that has disturbed the heart of God in this way? What has gone wrong in the community of God’s people? The list of offenses that Isaiah provides us with is eerily similar to many of our present-day temptations. Have we, too, accepted a certain version of reality as “normal,” without comparing it to God’s will for this world?

“Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures.”  (wealth as a source of security)
“Their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots.”  (violence and war as a source of security)
“They bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made.”  (materialism, maybe even technology)
“You who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine, with harps, tambourines, and flutes.”  (life of entertainment)
“You who join house to house and field to field until there is room for no one but you in the land.”  (materialism)
“It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses.”  (consuming resources that should be shared)

When the LORD of hosts looked at this society, “he expected justice, but saw bloodshed.”  And therefore, it will be “cleansed by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of burning.”  This is serious. But...God’s anger has one goal: restoration.
“Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:
I will turn my hand against you, I will smelt away your dross,
as with lye, and remove all your alloy.
And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.”

In all the language of epic frustration that we find here, we must always keep the goal in mind. And for Isaiah, the goal is clear. The goal is a world where God reigns fully, and where all forms of evil and injustice are eventually replaced by the ways of God – which means the life and blessing of all people. We are called to a radical re-orientation of our lives and our society, no longer shaped by the prevailing “normal” practices of our culture, but by the vision that God has for this earth. “Oh people, your leaders have misled you, and confused the course of your paths!” And to fix this problem, it will take repentance and even a painful pruning of life as we’ve known it. Things must change – very practical things about how we live. It may feel like “a spirit of burning” as certain things are stripped away that we once found comfort in. But the outcome is nothing less than the kingdom of God itself, which contains in it the very life we’ve all been longing for.

“In the 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 into it.
He 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 anymore.”