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Isaiah 29:13-16, 30:15-18
June 28, 2009

Isaiah, the prophet, is an aristocrat. He's not some country preacher. He is urbane, well educated. It must have been hard for him, being a very polite person, to say the things that God asked him to say to the people who heard his words. What's amazing to me is the way his words can travel over 2700 years to this room today and, like some psychiatrist probing our soul, Isaiah tells the truth about us, a truth that we may prefer not to hear, but the truth that we need to hear for the healing of our souls. Just in this short passage, he says enough things just to make you uncomfortable for a month or two. He says *You have turned things upside down*. We prefer to think "Oh, I got things a little bit wrong," but Isaiah says *You have turned things upside down*.

The Archbishop William Temple once said that the world is like a shop into which some mischievous person has sneaked in the middle of the night and has switched all the price tags around, and things that are really, really valuable appear to be cheap and not of much value, and things that have very little value have the high price tags. And we get fooled by this and we spend our lives on what really is of no consequence or is a mere triviality, and then we miss out on what is truly precious. We turn things upside down.

St. Francis of Assisi thought a lot about this, and so, he had a habit of standing on his head to look at things right side up. He would look at the City of Assisi and he would stand on his head to look at it. I'd read about that and when I first went to Assisi, I was young enough not to harm myself by standing on my head, and I got off the train, and I stood on my head, and I looked at Assisi the way St. Francis had, and it's amazing. If you look at Assisi right side up, this is what Francis thought, it looked like a strong city with walls, a secure bulwark, but if you stand on your head and look at it, it's like it might fall just at any moment. It is hanging there by the grace of God. And Francis said *So it is with our lives*. If we stand erect, we think, "I'm self-sufficient, I'm good, I'm on my own," but we really hang on the grace of God. We're dependent upon the mercy of God. And it's not a bad thing. We turn things upside down.

Isaiah in this passage says *In rest you will be saved*. And we said, "No, we will speed away on horses." You and I have a need for speed. We hurry, and we hurry, and we hurry, and we think if we could just go faster. If I could just shovel more coal into the engine of this train and get it ambling a little bit faster, then I could save myself somehow. But Isaiah says *It's only in rest. It's only in being still*.

A little over a year ago, we went through an exercise, and I need to remind you to re-up on this. We went through an exercise where we talked about the Sabbath, and we said it is possible, this is amazing, it is possible in the 21st century to take a day and not catch up on e-mail, not catch up on your shopping, not catch up on your work, not rush around frantically, but actually to have a day of rest. It is possible. And it could be that because we rush around so much and we're so busy and we have just crammed our schedule so very full of so very many activities, that's why we don't know God. That's why we miss out on our salvation. We never learned the lesson of Psalm 46 where God says *Be still and know that I am God*.

Isaiah uses the image of a potter, a potter, and the clay. God says *I am the potter, you are the clay*. And what we do is we argue with God. We say, "Let's do that differently, God. I will be the potter, you be the clay. This will work out really well, God. What I do is I'll shape you, oh God, into the kind of God that I want and that I need, and that will serve my purposes. That will be good. I'll be the potter, God. You be the clay." Or, we do this, we make a pot – I've never personally done this but I know people who have – we're potters, we make a pot, we've got our God pots, and then it becomes a decorative item. We put it up on a shelf somewhere, and we say, "God is in my life. He's in the next room, on the shelf." God doesn't want to be a decorative item in the next room on the shelf.

Isaiah goes on to speak about deeds that are done in the dark. Who can know – now you're probably as buffaloes as I was this week to read about the governor of my home state of South Carolina who got the brilliant idea of "I'll just sneak off down to Argentina and have a tryst, and no one will know, a phenomenally bad idea. And I've heard people who are just mortified by this. They say, "What's happened to the moral fiber of America, how could someone do such a thing?" The bad news that Isaiah would tell you today is that what Mark Sanford did is actually what every one of us, we do it all the time. We don't mean to and it may not be as splashy or as newsworthy as traipsing off to Argentina, but all of us have some dark corner. All of us have some secret. All of us have some part of our life that we think is shrouded in the dark, and no one can know. God must not know. Perhaps we don't even acknowledge it to ourselves, but we all have this, and until we go there, until we invite God to shine the light of God's grace into those hidden corridors of our lives, we will never have healing. We will never be whole.

There's another thing that Isaiah says that I love. Isaiah says *These are a people who draw near to me with their mouth, but their hearts are far from me. They draw near to me with their mouths, but their hearts are far from me*. It reminds me of a thing that Martin Luther King, Jr. said about desegregation, he said, "Desegregation alone can be hollow." He said "Our elbows may be close to each other while our hearts are far apart." Isaiah says *These people draw near to me with their mouth, but their hearts are far from me*.

I went shopping the other day. This is really newsworthy as I'm not much of a shopper, indeed, but we needed a new vacuum cleaner and somebody said "Best Buy, go to Best Buy," so I found Best Buy. I parked, I went in the door and there's an employee with a Best Buy name tag on, and he almost made eye contact with me, and I think I heard him mutter under his breath when he almost made eye contact with me "Good afternoon, thank you for coming to Best Buy." I think that's what he said. Clearly, he had been trained to be a greeter at the door so that I, as a shopper, would feel so welcome and so glad that I had come there to make my purchase. I bought the vacuum cleaner anyway. It was okay. But – how do you say it? His lips said the right thing but his heart was not in it. I suspected that in his heart, he was not that delighted to see James Howell come into Best Buy.

God looks down from heaven at some of our talk about God. We say, "I believe in God, I believe in God." The poll, you know, the vast majority of Americans believe in God. We talk a lot about God. We invoke the name of God. We say prayers now and then. We're just muttering, "God says." *These are a people who draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*. I think the question is "What is in your heart?" That's always what we want to know, isn't it? Talk to your spouse, child, parent, friend, what's in your heart? Tell me your heart. Don't hide it from me.

Tell me what is in your heart? God asks *What is in your heart?* Is it just talk, or are our hearts with God?

I had an e-mail debate this week. There's a guy who doesn't go to our church. I don't think he goes to any church. About once a week he engages me in some e-mail dialog hoping to defeat my faith and our faith, and this Monday I heard from him. He started in, he baited me with something he had found that said, "All those words that we use in church, we have creeds, we have liturgies, we have hymns, we have prayers," he said "all those words shield us from God. All those words keep us away from God. If we could just get rid of all those words, get rid of the creeds, get rid of the hymns, get rid of the prayers. If we could just get rid of that then we could see God clearly." We had an exchange back and forth and by Wednesday, I had defeated him. He conceded defeat himself. And when he said, "You win," I said "what was the clinching argument?" He said "It was this," he said that when I quoted the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said the following, he said "The function of a creed is to hold us still before Jesus." The function of a creed is to hold us still before Jesus. He elaborates, he says, "Because we're the kind of people who rush around all the time and are never still." We want to get a look at Jesus, but we're kind of running by and so we get just a glimpse of Jesus, and we go, "Oh yeah. That's the Jesus that I wanted to see in that quick little glance," and we don't really look at the fuller heart and mind of Jesus, but the words that we make you say here in church cause us to be still and to pay attention to the broader person that Jesus is.

I chuckle sometimes when I think about the words that I make you say every Sunday. I know you don't think of it that way, but we give you words to say, and sometimes I think, "Are they paying any attention to what I'm making them say?" You should either thank me or curse me. I'd prefer thanks to cursing. In fact, we make you pray the Lord's Prayer every Sunday. You come in and you seem to say it happily enough. But you know what we make you say? We make you say, "Lord, forgive us our trespasses" and that's fine, but then we make you add, "As we forgive those who trespass against us." We make you say it every week "Lord, forgive me to the degree to which I forgive others." – Ouch! The words are near me, but where are their hearts?

We make you when you come every week, we do this creed, we say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." If you think about that 'maker of heaven and earth' it really ought to alter everything, shouldn't it? I mean, if God made heaven and earth and God made you and God made everybody else, and God made all the stuff that's in the world, then that fundamentally alters the equation of what we do day to day and what we do with the stuff that we have.

Kevin Wright is here this morning, along with others of you who are here today, who were in Brazil just yesterday. We had a church mission team that went to Brazil - my wife and daughter went – and last night we were looking at photos from the mission trip in Brazil, and it was great. Rio is a beautiful city and our church is doing incredible work down there, and my favorite photos, I think, were the ones that some of you may actually may have had a hand in. We had a big toy collection. We collected hundreds and hundreds of toys, and our group – that was their second bag to check on the plane, right? – They took all these toys down to this orphanage for these very destitute children who have no toys at all. So, I'm seeing the photos of children receiving these toys, and they're just giddy with excitement, and our people are giddy with excitement, and it's a marvelous moment. And, you know what? If you don't believe God is maker of heaven and earth, you'll be tempted to say, "That is so cool. Let's do that again in a year or two." If you don't believe God is the maker of heaven and

earth, you say, "That was really cool. Let's do it again in a year or two." But if you believe God is the maker of heaven and earth, that God made us but God also made those children and God didn't make the resources for a toy or for kids to have a full life, and maybe God's calling us to do much, much, much more, not some little act to make us feel good but something that is broader, that is more comprehensive that genuinely transforms life.

We invite you to come into this church every week and say a creed and in it we speak of the Virgin Mary and people want to debate this with us, Was she really a virgin or not? Let me at least suggest to you that it might be a lovely thing in this culture if we knew how to speak appreciatively of something like virginity in a culture that has run amuck sexually, that will speak of virgin? *They draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.*

God is the potter. God is the potter. We want God to be the potter. Who we let be the potter to shape us is this media culture that is constantly rounding us and who Madison Avenue hopes that we will be. They hope that we will be consumers, that we will shop, and that we will buy. But God wants to shove that potter out of the way. God wants to be our potter to shape us, to change us, to make us into the kind of people who understand that everything has been turned upside down, to understand that we don't just wish to draw near to God with our lips, but truly with our hearts. God wants us to be still, to be still before Jesus. God wants us to be attentive to the work of God.

My favorite passage in what Mark read to you is through Isaiah, God details what all the people have done wrong. You turn everything upside down; you think that you're the potter instead of the Clay. You draw near with your lips but not with your heart. Go through all this and God says *Therefore I will* and we think God is going to finish the sentence by saying *strike you with thunder* or something. And instead, God says *I will again do marvelous things.*

It's so lovely. We pervert what God has given us. We run head-on away from God. We're entirely too busy for God. We turn everything upside down and God says *Because of this, I will do more wonderful things.* God loves us so much, he won't let us go. He is always in calm, zealous pursuit of us. He will again do marvelous things. God, in the past, has done so many marvelous things, and God will again do marvelous things, and the question is: Will we notice it? God waits to be gracious to us, and I suspect it is because we're kind of slow learners. It seems to take us some time. But maybe now is the time to understand that we have turned things upside down. When the first Christians went out to preach around the Mediterranean, you know what the complaint was about them? They said, "These men have turned the world upside down." It's really they've turned the world right side up for those of us who have turned the world upside down. We learn to see as God sees. We learn to be attentive to the subtle but sure movements of God's spirit. We learn the beauty of goodness. We learn to live out those words that we say with our lips and worship. As we sang just a few minutes ago, "Have thine own way Lord" not "Lord help my own way" but rather "Lord, have thine own way. I am the clay. You are the potter. Make me into the person that you made me to be. Heal me. Go to that dark place. Go to that dark place. Shine the light of your grace there. Lord, I will be still and know your grace."

Thanks be to God.