

“Either Or And”
Isaiah 1:12-20; 24-26; 5:1-7
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The inventor Thomas Edison tried a lot of things before he hit on the light bulb.

And he said this - - about all the things he tried leading UP TO the light bulb:

“I didn’t fail - - I just found 10,000 ways that did NOT work.”

Before he found the way that worked - - he found the ways that did not.

And Edison found a few really GOOD ways to things.

Things like not only the light bulb, but the phonograph and others.

But first - - he found the ways that did NOT work.

The prophets of the Old Testament are similar.

The Old Testament records in great detail the 10,000 things people did that did not work - - and the ways that they abandoned God - - and experienced tragedy and pain - - while they WAITED for God’s blessing and mercy.

Maybe you don’t think that God is the way.

Well - - before you decide - - here are some things

that we know are really NOT the way...

One example is TRAMPLING.

Give me a minute and I’ll explain what I mean.

In chapter 5 of the prophet Isaiah, the prophet describes God as the keeper of a vineyard. / And this farmer cares deeply for his vineyard and the grapes. / God clears away all the stones, and cultivates the soil - - gives the vineyard everything. / But when the vineyard does not produce - - good grapes - - God says:

“I am going to TRAMPLE it all down!”

It's a shocking warning - - for those with ears to hear.

It seems harsh and judgmental.

Maybe it's the farmer's fault that the grapes that grew were wild grapes.

Shouldn't the farmer know how to make the right things grow?

Why - - does this farmer - - who the prophet has compared to God - - trample?

Why does God - - trample?

Well - - maybe it's a warning - - not a historical report?

Or maybe - - it's NOT God - - who did the trampling.

We know that the historical records of this time show that Assyria invaded.

Assyria - - trampled over the people of Yahweh.

And so they ask - - was the invasion - - God's judgment?

Is our tragedy and pain - - God's judgment?

Well - - the prophet says so.

But maybe - - it's not God's FINAL judgment - - on EVERYONE.

Do you remember what the people did to the courts - - and laws of God?

In chapter 1 of Isaiah it says:

“When you appear before me - - who makes you TRAMPLE my courts?

Isaiah says, the PEOPLE TRAMPLE on God!

So we might ask - - is God's trampling of the vineyard - - judgment - - for...

...the trampling of the people?

Trampling over God's courts - - and God's justice?

Maybe. / But the thing is - - all this trampling - - it doesn't really work.

And I believe - - God KNOWS that.

As I said - - the judgment of God - - is real, but...

It is real - - but it is not the last word.

The last word - - is mercy.

The prophets - - were a WAKE UP call.

The prophets - - recorded all the 10,000 ways that did NOT work.

All the things people did - - that led nowhere - -

actually CAN lead SOMEWHERE!

Namely - - they CAN lead - - to God - - and God's ways.

That's the HOPE.

That's the hope of the prophets.

But - - we have to DECIDE.

We have to decide HOW we are going to live our lives.

And deciding can be - - difficult.

The prophet Isaiah describes morality as - - an EITHER/OR choice.

In chapter 1 - - verse 19 and 20 - - Isaiah says:

“IF you are obedient - - THEN you will eat well.

But IF you are rebellious - - THEN you will be devoured by violence”

Either this - - OR that.

But in the very SAME chapter - - God - - has second thoughts.

God's judgment - - is NOT either/or - - either.

In the very same chapter - - God says:

“I will RESTORE your judges - -

And you will be a CITY of RIGHTEOUSNESS”

So it turns out - - God doesn't really want to trample everything.

It's not as simple as - - either/or.

There's a decision for us to make - - for God.

AND - - IF - - we decide to turn back to GOD - -

God will turn to us and show mercy.

That's what the prophet says - - in the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

The prophet begs the people to:

Cease evil and do good.

Seek justice.

Correct oppression.

Defend the fatherless and the widows.

Make a decision for God: Stop trampling.

The question for us is - - what will we decide - - to do?

Hopefully we are NOT like the unicorn - - in this rhyme by Shel Silverstein:

I walked through the wildwood and what did I see?

A UNICORN - - with his horn - - stuck in a tree.

Crying: "Somebody HELP me - - before it's TOO LATE"

I hollered: "I'll FREE you!"

But he hollered back - - - - "Wait..."

How much will it hurt? How long will it take?

Are you sure that my horn will not scratch, bend or break?

How hard will you pull? How much must I pay?

Must you do it right NOW - - or is Wednesday OK?

Have you done this BEFORE? Do you have the right TOOLS?

Have you graduated from any “horn-saving schools”?

Will I owe you a favor? And WHAT will it BE?

Do you promise you will not damage the tree?

Should I close my eyes? Should I SIT or STAND?

Do you have insurance? / Have you - - - WASHED your HANDS!?

And AFTER you free me - - - WHAT THEN?

Can you guarantee that I won’t get stuck AGAIN?

Tell me WHEN, tell me HOW,

Tell me WHY, tell me WHERE...?

Well - - I guess - - that he’s STILL sitting there.

Maybe the shocking nature of prophetic speech - - is an antidote to this.

An antidote to - - INDECISION.

Indecision on the part of - - people of faith.

There’s a story about a YOUNG bank president - - newly appointed.

This young man has questions for the retiring older president.

She had been bank president for decades.

And there she sat - - listening to this young man...

“What’s the MOST important thing for me to DO as new president?”

“Make RIGHT decisions” she answered.

“Well - - HOW do I make - - right decisions?” the young man asked.

The wise old woman answered: “Experience”

The young man was a little worried by her response:

“Experience - - well - - ma’am that’s why I’m talking to YOU. / You have experience - - and I don’t have the experience I need to make the right decisions. / HOW do I get - - - experience?”

Her answer: “Wrong decisions”.

So what does the story of YOUR decisions look like?

If your life were told - - through a record of your decisions - -

what would it be like?

You are going about your business, and someone interrupts and you have to decide how to respond. / Little decisions you make every day. / Some bigger than others...

Two spiritual roads stretch out in front of you...

One leads to less love in the world - - and one leads to more...

One leads toward God - - and the other leads away...

What will you decide?

Or - - you did make a mistake - - God forbid...

Now - - you have a chance to apologize, make it right...

What will you decide?

Or you have been wronged - - and you have an opportunity to forgive...

What will you decide?

All of these “either/or” moments could be added together in order.

And they would tell a story.

Either/or and either/or and either/or....

That story - - is the prophetic consciousness - - behind our faith.

The GOOD news is - - that God - - offers us numerous opportunities.

Opportunities to decide.

Call them the days of our lives.

And God - - wants to RESTORE us - - and make us whole.

May it be so - - for you and for me.

Amen.