

## COME LET US REASON TOGETHER

### Isaiah 1:1, 18-20 (RSV)

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, August 7, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### INTRODUCTION

Through six sermons I am preaching this summer, we will have looked at four prophets: Elijah and Elisha in June; Amos in July; and this Sunday and next, Isaiah. Then I will go off on vacation in Swan's Island, Maine, a place we couldn't visit last year; and return for September 11, which we are calling "Homecoming Sunday." On that day, we will resume two worship services and then invite everyone able to an indoor/outdoor Bar-B-Q following the 11:00 a.m. service. This will kick off what we hope will be the first "COVID-lite" year in three years.

Unlike Amos, Isaiah is one of three classical prophets of the Old Testament: Jeremiah and Ezekiel being the other two. They are classic in the sense that their books are much longer than the prophets known as "The Minor Prophets," of which Amos is one. The book of Isaiah includes oracles attributed to the prophet by that name, but these oracles grow out of and refer to historical events from both the eighth and sixth centuries BCE. As they speak to historical situations two hundred years apart, it is apparent that the book of Isaiah contains both oracles Isaiah spoke and oracles others spoke in his stead. Among these collective oracles are found some of the most stirring and beautiful passages of scripture – many put to music by Handel in his *Messiah*:

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God."<sup>1</sup>

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given."<sup>2</sup>

"And with his stripes we are healed."<sup>3</sup>

A middle-aged man in one of my early churches, raised in a secular household in New York, attended the church with his formerly Roman Catholic wife, also from New York. Even in this small church, he was so moved by the choir's presentation of *Messiah* that he sat down and read Isaiah – in one sitting. It led him to embrace Christian faith. I was awed by what he experienced, what he had come to know, what he had come to believe. As a young minister, I knew he knew more about Isaiah than I did.

I am going to read the opening verse to the book – Isaiah 1:1, then verses 18-20 from that same first chapter. Verse 18 contains another well-known saying from which today's sermon title is drawn. I am reading from the *Revised Standard Version*, which has a slightly different translation of the phrase than that in your pew Bibles.

Here now the word of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 40:1 KJV.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 9:6 KJV.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 53:5 KJV.

## FOCUS PASSAGE

*The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.<sup>4</sup>*

...

*“Come now, let us reason together,  
says the Lord:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool.  
If you are willing and obedient,  
you shall eat the good of the land;  
but if you refuse and rebel,  
you shall be devoured by the sword;  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

## PRAYER

*Let us pray: Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove; Come kindle the flame of sacred love; however dramatically, however faintly, in these hearts of ours stretched in so many different ways. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

## SERMON

*“Come now, let us reason together.”*

This phrase – while not as soaring as passages from *Messiah* – can speak to us directly, communally, personally.

This phrase can speak to us as a *nation*, as a culture, and as *individuals*, particularly during those times when the distance we feel between ourselves and our God seems to grow further and further, when our faith may be at a lower ebb than normal.

*“Come now, let us reason together.”*

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<sup>4</sup> These four kings reigned successively from 783 – 687 BCE, spanning 96 years. Oracles attributed to or named after Isaiah are found in the eighth century addressed to the people of God in Judah, in the sixth century addressed to the God’s people living in exile in Babylon, and, a few years later, to those who returned to Judah from exile after 539 BCE. Oracles from these different periods were taken up, adapted, and sometimes revised to speak to new historical situations, while maintaining the underlying emphases on 1) God’s sovereignty as king over heaven and earth, 2) Jerusalem as the Holy City God chose to dwell, 3) the line of David as God’s anointed vice-regent on earth, 4) the distinct expectation that the people of Israel live up to their sacred covenant, and 5) universal concern that all the nations of the world to be included in God’s promise.

## I.

First, the *nation and culture*.

I was inspired to focus on this phrase for the sermon by an article I read shortly before Easter and then a discussion I was able to attend with the author along with a dozen other clergy at the Trinity Forum in downtown DC. The article is titled “How to Curb the Culture Wars,” and it is written by Yuval Levin, a political theorist and thinker and who is both Israeli and American and lives in Washington.

Levin writes:

Our culture war plainly lacks boundaries.

Every realm of our lives has become one of its battlefields. Not only in politics but also in schools and universities, in corporate America, in our places of worship and places of work, in civil society and in our private lives, online and in person, there is often... no getting away from that intense, divisive, and rigidly partisan struggle.

He continues:

The particular disputes – over which we are supposed to be at each other’s throats – constantly shift and change. Sometimes it’s race and policing, sometimes immigration and borders, sometimes American history or education... election integrity, vaccines, masks...

The list of controversies is endless, but the parties to them are remarkably *constant* and *durable*. Individually, these fights sometimes touch on genuinely *vital* questions. Yet seen together they appear as a *vast sociopolitical psychosis*. They are all one fight, and the fight is the point...

What Levin is most concerned about is the way virtually no area of our lives remains *free* from important ideological differences.

...the sheer *reach* and *range* of the dispute may be what stands out most now. Whatever is the leading cultural controversy of the hour demands our attention and implies action in *every domain* of our lives, so the differences between different domains become *blurred*. We end up doing more or less the same thing everywhere – displaying our team colours and expressing our partisan affiliations. This...raises deeper problems in those domains where we have *other important work* to do.<sup>5</sup>

This, Levin argues, is part of what keeps us from coming together with *reasonable* solutions that benefit the *common good*. As he says: “Common action and ultimately common life [have become nearly] impossible.”

My friends: It is hard to “reason together” without the mood, the atmosphere, and the commitment to come together and be “reasonable.” All of us – secular, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, native-born, immigrant – need to engage in a *national hearing* of the words God spoke through Isaiah. We need to hear “Come now, let us reason together.” It could lead us to relate to one another more as human beings than political or ideological combatants. In that way, it could lead us to strengthen the *common good*. In addition, it would free other spheres of our lives to do their primary work: of craftsmanship or commerce, study or analysis, teaching or medical care. It would

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<sup>5</sup> Yuval Levin, “How to Curb the Culture Wars,” *Comment* 4/7/22. Available at <https://comment.org/how-to-curb-the-culture-war/>.

make worship more holy and all of our relationships richer – from the most personal to the most political. This *moral usage* of this passage can speak to us in this way in our nation.

## II.

The second usage of this phrase is also *communal* and *ethical*. It arises not from a secular article I read but from the *context* of the chapter in Isaiah in which it appears. Listen to a few verses that directly precede the phrase “Come now, let us reason together”:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
learn to do good;  
seek justice...

And then:

rescue the *oppressed*,  
defend the *orphan*,  
plead for the *widow*.

When Isaiah is speaking for God, asking us to “reason together,” the subject immediately preceding in God’s mind and on Isaiah’s tongue is that longstanding Old Testament concern for the *poor*, expressed through the phrase “the oppressed, the orphan, the widow.”

From the earliest chapters of Genesis – “Am I my brother’s keeper?”<sup>6</sup> – through the final promises of Revelation – “no more... mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow”<sup>7</sup> – a primary concern of the Maker of us all, and thus of the church, is *poverty*. Poverty. “Rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

As much as the standard of living across the world has vastly improved over the last several centuries, millions remain trapped in poverty and its attendant ills. Can you imagine what “reasoning together” about the condition of millions of people across the world could actually accomplish? Can you imagine what widespread, systematic, disciplined reasoning about poverty could do? Not everything. But some things. Many things.

## III.

If *ethical* readings of this phrase concern partisanship on the one hand and poverty on the other, a *third* reading speaks to *the dark night of the soul*: those times, night or day, passing or seemingly permanent, when the distance we feel between ourselves and our God seems to grow further and further.

When we encounter the phrase, “Come now, let us reason together,” we need to recognize that it is not spoken by prophet to people, by one person to another person, by peer to peer.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 4:9.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 21:4.

While it is mouthed by Isaiah, it is spoken *by God* to a people from whom God is *estranged*, a people who have *let God down*.

What is *most important* in this passage is that God is *taking the initiative* to *open a conversation* in which to be sure God is going to express his disappointments and even level his charges against his people (“though your sins are like scarlet...they are red like crimson”). But it is also a passage in which God is inviting the people to participate as well, to speak to God face to face.

I resonate with the translation I read earlier – “Come now, let us reason together.” But the translation in our pew Bibles reads “Come now, let us *argue it out*.” The value of this “pew Bible” translation<sup>8</sup> is the clear affirmation that what God is inviting us to is not a one-way conversation. God is inviting us to give voice to our heartache, grief, anger, distance, disappointment – even in God. All of it is for the sake of realizing and claiming God’s promise of a restored relationship with God. God is seeking to get the matter *resolved*, to *restore* the relationship, to *enable us as God’s people* to return to the service we have rendered for so very long and the refreshment we have previously experienced in the presence of God:

*though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be like snow;*

*though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool.*

*If you are willing and obedient,  
you shall eat the good of the land...*

“Come now,” God says. “Let us see what we can get resolved between you and me.”

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Coming out of COVID has in some ways been more difficult than going in. It sometimes seems as if the spiritual distance among ourselves or between ourselves and God has become more pronounced, the gnawing absence of God more palpable, the overwhelmed-ness of life more acute.

- As some of you know, we have had in this area of town several people in the past few months or years end their own lives, some of them close to some of you.
- We have also had many in our congregation – youth, young adults, middle aged – lose good friends and beloved family members, some of whom have just lost the will to live in a sequestered world.

We know that tragic, unexpected deaths can sometimes draw us *to* God, but often the death of a good friend, a cousin, an aging parent, a favorite uncle, and certainly the death of any child, singular or *en masse*, can cause whatever faith and trust we have to seem irretrievably lost.

My own wife is in St. Petersburg, Florida, this weekend, gathered with every remaining first cousin on her mother’s side of a large family for the funeral of one of their number – a sixty-four old anesthesiologist who out for his normal, pre-surgery morning bicycle ride, lost his life in an accident. Some in this large, variegated,

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<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 1:18 NRSV.

multigenerational family gathered, some will likely grow closer to God because of the experience of worship, nurture, and care they have this weekend. But some, perhaps many, will grow distant, angry, estranged from God facing the loss of someone they love or admire.

But the promise of this passage – particularly of God’s “speaking first” – is that whether we are distant from God or growing closer, whether we are burdened by awareness of our “crimson like sinfulness” or overwhelmed by a sudden tragedy over which we cannot even yet shed tears, it is God who – beyond ethics, beyond partisanship, beyond national or culture life, beyond on in the midst of poverty – *opens the door* to a conversation, *seeks* to lead enact *resolution* and *repair* of the relationship that has grown estranged and distant.

Come now,  
Let us reason together.  
Even if we need to argue it out,  
Even if you need to say things to me  
You never thought appropriate to say to God,  
Even if you need to hear things from me  
You know to be true  
But don’t appreciate having pointed out to you:  
Come now,  
Let us reason together.  
Come now.