

Advent Midweek 1, December 6, 2023
Text: Isaiah 1:16-18

Theme: STOP!

“Stop! Look! And Listen! was the phrase I was taught about crossing railroad tracks and it’s the theme for our midweek Advent services. Trains are big and they move far faster than people sometimes think. Mr. Mitchel, my driver’s ed teacher, wanted us to be afraid of trains in hopes that we might live past the age of 20. Fear can be a good thing. We live in a time and a place when people have become puffed up and arrogant. People seem to pride themselves on being afraid of nothing and no one. 50 years ago, the Klu Klux Klan would march in the streets of southern cities proclaiming their message of white supremacy, but they wore hoods and masks. They were afraid that if their neighbors knew who they were, they would be shunned or worse.

Now the tables have turned. Every person can loudly and sometimes vulgarly proclaim whatever message they like and they are protected by society. Their ideas are forced on others and anyone who disagrees is shunned or worse. The men of the KKK thought they were right and everyone should agree with them. The people of today think they are right and everyone should agree with them. The only difference is that now society protects every radical idea and elevates the minority opinion above the majority. Not only

that, but we have lost our basis for what is right and wrong. We knew the KKK was wrong because the Bible told us that all people were children of God and none were less than another. But now, the Bible does not matter for many people. Whatever you think is right, is protected no matter how ignorant or ridiculous your idea is, unless what you think is based on Scripture.

The Bible is very clear. God's Word is right and everything we do and say is supposed to be formed by and based upon His Word. Not everyone likes our inflexible, intolerant God. Some of the harshest, biting, and cutting words spoken by God are recorded in Scripture through the Old Testament prophets. They are intended to instill, among other things, fear in the hearts and the minds of wayward people. On many occasions, God breathed out warnings of impending punishment and judgment on people who had turned from him toward other gods and had done all of the things that God said that they were never to do. God was not just going to sit idly by and let this happen. Instead, he warned, threatened, and even promised discipline for the purpose of instilling fear that the people might repent and seek God once again.

In the first chapter of his book, the prophet Isaiah spoke the Word of the Lord to the people,

"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause (Is. 1:16-17).

These words of God are important for us to hear as surely as they were for ancient Israel. Fear of God is good just like fear of trains is good. It is why we Stop, Look and Listen. It is easy to become preoccupied with worldly values and priorities that distract us from what is truly good, right and pleasing to God and we forget to fear God.

God should be disgusted with his people whose focus and energy are on pursuing that which really has no lasting value and no great significance as far as our relationship with him is concerned. God should be upset with us and speak hard words of judgment when we don't recognize the value and importance of maintaining a faithful relationship with him. He has entrusted to us countless resources. He has given to us his Word. He reminds us that we are his baptized people, and he offers us regularly the forgiveness of sins through the Holy Supper. Yet so often, we are interested in everything but that which God uses to draw us close to him. We are consumed with messages from the world and not only do we defend ignorant people who speak these messages but sometimes we even find ourselves

secretly agreeing with them as we begin to think that perhaps our own sins could be justified if we stand with those who proclaim messages that are in conflict with the Word of God. God says to us, **“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil...”**

But the message from Isaiah is not only that we “cease to do evil.” Law without Gospel is useless to us. We know that we are evil by nature and telling us that over and over again will not help us be less evil. We have to hear the Gospel to empower us to live lives and speak words that are more in line with God. Isaiah goes on to say in verse 18,

“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.”

We can no more stop sinning than the sun can stop shining or the world can stop turning. Our hope of salvation comes only from God. God came to the people to whom Isaiah first spoke with a message of hope and the promise of a Savior. Unlike Isaiah’s people, we have seen that promise fulfilled so while they clung to a promise. We cling to the reality that Jesus has turned our scarlet sins white as wool. So, when it comes to all these anti-Christian messages, all these various groups promoting anti-Christian ideals, just stop.

Stop allowing yourself to get caught up in their rhetoric and drama that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you will recognize once again what is right, proper, and good for us each day we live. We are God's enlightened people. By God's grace we have come to know the true God and his Son, Jesus Christ. Yet, at times, we are inclined to head in a different direction from what is pleasing to God. That's why it is important for us to *stop*: to listen to what God is saying to us; to remember that we are children of God; to understand what God expects of us, his people who are living in this sinful, troubled world.

In his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus calls us the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world." He has given us great responsibilities and, at the same time, has high expectations, because he has given us the Holy Spirit. We have the power and the strength we need to make a powerful impact on the world in which we live, so that people who are sounding the trumpet of the times might come to know the almighty God.