



MINISTER  
DAN YEAZEL, PREACHING  
KIM JOHNSON

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*A Lively Faith*

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8/8/04 Community Presbyterian "A Lively Faith" Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Intro: Our Old Testament reading comes from the opening chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah is one of the "major prophets" of ancient Israel. Prophets had a pretty difficult job description, because they were called by God to tell people things they really would rather not hear. In the book that bears his name Isaiah goes right to his task. Let us listen. (Pray)

I begin this morning with a classic sermon illustration. A bird story really. If you know it you can help me finish it. It is the story of First Goose Church. At the Sunday morning service, Pastor Gander was presiding and

he waddled up to the pulpit and began his fiery sermon.

"What kind of birds are we?" He asked in a thundering voice.

"Geese!" The congregation answered, and an "Amen" was heard from somewhere in the back.

"That's right!" shot back the Pastor, "We are GEESE! God made us GEESE to be GEESE, and not DUCKS or Penguins or KIWIS!"

"AMEN!" honked several congregants.

"And what are these things that GOD has given us, these MAJESTIC appendages?"

"WINGS!" shouted the congregation, honking its approval of this fine observation.

"And WHY did GOD give us these fine wings?"

"To FLY, Pastor!" said one goose all ruffled up, standing up in the first row. "We can FLY with 'em!"

Choruses of "That's right" rang out from around the room.

The pastor really started into a groove now. "God wants us to FLY! We can soar above the clouds! We can fill the skies! We are God's flying children! The moles can dig, the lions can hunt, but we can fly! We can catch the winds beneath our wings and thrill to the sensation of the breeze through our feathers. We can reach the mighty mountain tops and skim the tips of the giant sequoias!"

"AMEN! We can FLY!" the congregation echoed back

"If GOD wants us to fly, then what do we gotta do?" challenged the pastor.

"We gotta FLY!" said the congregation.

"We gotta WHAT?" asked Pastor Gander?

"We gotta FLY!"

"WHAT?"

"FLY!!"

"WHAT?"

"FLY!!"

Service ended and who knows what happened? Anyone? As the congregation WADDLED out of the church and WALKED home, they remarked to one another on how inspiring the pastor's sermon was that morning. But no one, not even the pastor lifted a wing.

It is rather hard to hear these opening words from Isaiah. As if they weren't blunt enough, they could be paraphrased in this way, that God is saying, "I don't want

to hear your prayers. I don't want your offerings or I don't want to listen to your anthems and I can't stand your sermons!" (Thank goodness nobody offered an "amen" to that.) Needless to say, Isaiah is doing a very good job of capturing peoples attention as he strives to tell the people of Israel what needs to change.

The heart of this opening passage is the call to recognize that worship needs to make a difference in order to be meaningful and fulfilling to us, and to God. God cannot endure solemn assemblies Isaiah says. Now that puts us Presbyterians in an especially tricky spot, we wrote the book on "decency" and "order". Solemn is one of the things we do very well. Our saving grace comes with the disclaimer that it is solemn assemblies with iniquity that upsets God. It is worship that just happens and sits there, that causes no change for the better that Isaiah is warning about. It was an issue of concern then as it is today. When we worship, do we gather and seek God in a way which is open to being changed, do we just put in pew time or pulpit time and head home? Tough questions. We will not be sent each and every week to new levels of discipleship, but if we remain unchanged forever by what is done in worship, what good is it?

Isaiah asks this question, and it gets our attention. He points out the futility of worship that has no spirit. Then he moves toward what is really important in order to have a growing and lively faith. It is this, if we learn, if we are moved to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphaned, speak for the widow, then we are going in the right direction THEN God rejoices in our worship. That is the litmus test for our faith –what it does in action. Do we worship with a lively faith that calls us to do something in response to God's

claims on our lives? Not that the doing saves us, but because we are claimed by God we feel the desire, the need, to respond and work toward God's will.

Part of a lively faith involves a continual discernment of what God's will is for the present moment. We change through time, the needs around us change through the years. So there must be an ongoing discussion of what is needful today and into the future. We don't ever get to rest and say yep, we have this faith thing down pat. We've got it all figured out. We have the perfect worship service and the perfect prayer lives. We need to be continually reflecting on what we do and how worship shapes us.

There is a particularly catching phrase in verse 8 as God says, "come let us argue it out." That was perhaps not the most appealing invitation to argue with God. The Israelites have just been berated for their worship and now God says, "come and argue with me." "Argue" can be a loaded word, it can convey a sense of anger, or a win/lose situation. For someone to win an argument - someone most lose.

That is how I came to first think of argument or debate. I remember the sense of competition in my debate club in high school. I know the thrill of dashing an opponents' argument to shreds with just the right words. I know what it like to have circles run around me as well. There was a time though, when my perception of arguing changed. It was actually during one debate when I was teamed up with my best friend and we were debating two other of our closest friends. We had each studied up our sides, knew every angle of our viewpoint

and we were debating the merits of nuclear power, or gun control or some easily answered issue. When the debate was over the teacher said well done, you have presented the issues well, now let's debate again and you switch sides. See how well you understand the others point of view.

That didn't go so well. Each side was so welded to their viewpoint that there was little energy available to be convincing on the "other side". Even though we were good debaters, and had just heard their arguments, we could not even recite them very well, much less be persuasive. The other side had the same trouble. Our teacher convicted us as she said how are you ever going to discover the truth if you don't even really know what the other is talking about.

Isaiah asks us to trade sides for a moment, and consider God's position. Think about God's response to when we gather to worship. We sing songs, we preach and pray. What does God think of it all? It can be wonderful, if it reshapes us into the new community God is planning on. If we walk home unchanged and uninterested in helping others. What have we done?

The King James translation of verse 8 is come let us reason together. I like that too. For reasoning is finding what makes sense, what is lasting and has merit. That is what God is calling us to through Isaiah's words. We may feel called up short by the challenging words that God may be offended by some of our worship or prayers. Maybe God is. Maybe we do need to be more involved in our worship and more mindful of how we approach God. Perhaps we need to look deeper into our lives and see how our beliefs shape us. Does our faith cause us to

be unsettled at times and lead us to do things we don't usually do? Or that society doesn't say needs to be done?

The people of ancient Israel thought that by keeping the prescribed rituals, they were doing all that needed to be done. They burned incense and celebrated all the festivals. What more could God expect? God expects us to be changed and challenged by our worship. That through our worship we are inspired to learn and do good, seek justice, serve the oppressed. When we worship like that, we will find that God is not arguing with us, but using worship to change us and call us to spread our wings and take off. Amen.