

ISAIAH'S LITTLE PSALM

It's bad enough to get a ticket. It's worse when a police officer delivers it to your door.

My cousin, John, and I, both students at Western Seminary, had been duck hunting in Oregon. It was early January and we were enjoying that last days of the season. A state game officer happened by and checked our licenses. To our dismay, we discovered that Oregon game licenses have to be renewed every year on January 1. Michigan licenses are valid from April of one year through April the following year – they're good for the entire season. We were guilty – hunting without a valid license.

About a week and a half later, one of Oregon's finest knocked at my door with a summons to court. I had to stand before a judge and explain why I had violated the game laws of the great state of Oregon.

John and I both bought current licenses before we went. We wore suits and ties, presented our updated licenses and respectfully explained our immigrant status and our ignorance of the differences between state laws. To our great relief, the judge graciously dismissed the charges. We both breathed huge sighs of relief.

It's a scary thing to be summoned into court. Even if the complaint against us is minor, it's scary to stand before a judge, especially when you know you're guilty.

If you think it's frightening to stand before an earthly judge, think of what it would be like to be summoned before the righteous Judge of all the earth!

God called the Prophet Isaiah to knock on Israel's door with a summons against God's people – the southern kingdom of Judah. The opening verse of Isaiah calls God's court into session: "Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For Yahweh speaks" (Isaiah 1:2).

When God made his great covenant with his people, Israel, he had called upon the heavens and the earth as witnesses to the terms of the covenant. With Israel poised on the east bank of the Jordan, ready to enter the land of promise, Moses reviewed and renewed God's covenant with his people. He said: "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life..." (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Israel had violated the covenant over and over again. Generation after generation ignored Yahweh, Israel's true God. They had pursued false gods, disobeyed God's laws and acted with impunity. They chose death.

God could no longer ignore their rebellion. Through his prophet, God takes his people to court, calls witnesses – the heavens and the earth – and lays out his charges:

- Israel had turned their backs on God
- they offered meaningless sacrifices which God detested
- they were guilty of gross injustice and murder
- they paraded their fraudulent wealth with arrogance
- they had become wise in their own eyes – they thought they were smarter than God
- they made drinking a national sport and getting drunk heroic
- they were spiritually diseased, a festering open wound
- the land was unproductive and the people unprotected
- they were exposed to God's judgment.

It's a scary thing to stand before a judge – at least, it should have been. Isaiah had the impossible task of speaking for God to a people who had ears but refused to hear, who had eyes but refused to see, whose hearts were calloused, who would not acknowledge God.

Isaiah warned of impending judgment. A day was coming when cities would lie ruined, houses would be desolate. Warriors would be crushed in battle and women shamed – shaved bald and branded as slaves by invading armies.

It was a horrific message.

And woven through it were promises. A remnant Branch would become a glorious vine. A shoot would sprout from the burned out root of Jesse – King David's father. God's Spirit would rest upon that shoot. He would be for his people a deliverer – Messiah – to wash away their moral filth and restore them to holiness.

Peace would reign, even in nature: wolves would live with lambs; leopards would sleep with goats, toddlers would safely play where cobras slithered in and out of their holes. The whole earth would be filled with God's *shalom*. Everyone would acknowledge Yahweh to be God.

Isaiah, God's prophet, saw all this. The impending judgment was terrifying. But beyond judgement was hope. God would bring salvation. And Isaiah, anticipating what God would do for his people, wrote a little Psalm of thanksgiving to be sung in that day when God restored the fortunes of his people – Isaiah 12:1-6.

Isaiah wrote knowing the nation was on the brink of disaster. He began his ministry about 750 BC. The northern kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity by Assyria in 721 BC, 29 years later. Judah, in the south, was overrun by Babylon and Jerusalem destroyed in 586 BC. No king would sit on David's throne for 600 years. The family tree of Jesse, father of David and his dynasty, was reduced to a stump.

Until Jesus came. Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise. He was the cast-away Branch who would become glorious. Jesus was heir to David's throne, the shoot sprouting from Jesse's stump. On the cross, Jesus provided redemption for his people, offering his life's blood for the guilt of their souls. By faith in Jesus Israel could be washed clean. And when Jesus rose from the dead, God's promised new day dawned.

We're still in the sunrise of that new day. Not everything Isaiah predicted has come to pass – not yet. We wait for the completion of the promised salvation. We still live with the curse of sin even though our sins are forgiven. God's *shalom* is in the hearts of those who follow Jesus, but it is not yet universal – peace does not yet reign everywhere. We're in the time between the already of Christ's resurrection and the not yet of Christ's rule upon the earth. The resurrection signaled the beginning of the last days, but it's not the last day. Not yet.

But Isaiah's Psalm resonates in our own hearts. God in his grace has extended the blessings of his salvation to all who believe in his Messiah, Jesus. Look at verse 1 again.

As a Christ-follower looking back on what Jesus has done for me, I can add my "Amen!" to Isaiah's words. God had every right to be angry with me. I wanted to write my own rules about right and wrong. God set boundaries I wanted to cross, and foolishly, I crossed them. I wanted what I wanted and I especially didn't want God to hold me accountable.

I defiantly pursued wrong in the face of a just and holy God. God was right to be angry with me.

And since I had nothing by which I could make things right with God, and would have stubbornly refused to try in any case, God reached across the alienation – the impossible divide – to restore me to himself. The Bible says "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Jesus died in our place to satisfy God's justice. We expect human judges to pass sentence on those who violate our own laws. How much more shall the righteous Judge of all the earth be expected to pass sentence on those who violate his laws.

The Bible says we must all appear before his judgment seat to give an account of what we have done. It's a scary thing to be summoned into any court. That summons – to appear before

God's judgment seat – would prove to be our undoing.

That's why Jesus stepped up and took our place. He answered our summons. And even though he had done nothing wrong – not ever – he took into himself the punishment we deserved; the punishment I deserved.

And that's why Isaiah's little Psalm resonates in my own heart: "I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me [and rightly so] your anger has turned away and you have comforted me."

Jesus turned away God's holy anger at me when he hung on the cross. The entire record of my wrongdoing got nailed to that cross, and Jesus paid my debt to God's law in full.

"Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.
Yah, Yahweh, is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.
With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation."

On one of my first back-packing trips into the wilderness, we climbed up to the Bull of the Woods, a fire tower on a bald knob in the Cascade Mountains. I quickly drank up all my water on the uphill trek and by the time we got to the top, I was parched – cotton-mouthed.

We had one source of water: in a cave a few yards off the trail, a spring trickled out of the rocks. It took precious minutes to fill our canteens.

Imagine getting up there and discovering wells all over the place – an abundance of water immediately available to everyone all the time!

That's the picture Isaiah paints. "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Toward the end of his book, Isaiah writes: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare" (Isaiah 55:1-2).

What God gives us in Jesus can satisfy the deepest longings of our souls. He has opened up wells of salvation and they're all over the place. God invites us to drink freely, all the time.

That kind of news is too good to keep to ourselves – v. 4-6.

The last line is the most significant for translating Isaiah's Psalm into action. You can't silence people who are drinking from "the wells of salvation" and who really believe God is among them – he meets with them when they gather for worship. When God's people experience God's greatness, they talk about it. That's why worship is vital to our witness. If we aren't experiencing anything authentic, we won't have an authentic story to tell.

That doesn't mean we turn up the amps and crank up the activity. It's not about the show, it's about the heart of a people eager to step into God's presence and honor him. God inhabits authentic praise and worship. He makes us better than we are. When we encounter God in our worship we walk away wishing our friends and family could experience what we have just experienced.

Ever walked out of our worship wishing that?

Many of you pray for the preacher on Sunday. Be just as faithful in praying for those who plan and lead our worship. When we experience the Holy One among us, Isaiah's words will fill our mouths:

"Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
Make known among the nations what he has done
And proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing to the LORD for he has done glorious things.
Let this be known to all the world.”

Thanksgiving is over and we’ve already turned our attention to Christmas. But *giving* thanks is fundamental for Christ-followers. Celebrating our reconciliation with God is a lifetime endeavor. And telling others the good news isn’t just an obligation – it’s the inside-out expression of people who have been restored to God and who are experiencing God’s greatness.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise him all creatures here below.
Praise him above ye heavenly host.
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen!