

God is in the Middle

Sermon for the Day of Repentance

Sermon Text: Isaiah 1:10-18



¹⁰ Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹ “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ¹² “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? ¹³ Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations – I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. 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.

God Himself is present:

Let us now adore Him

And with awe appear before Him.

That’s what we just sang now. We are here because God is here. We also came today to seek God. That’s the whole purpose of our worship service. That’s also the purpose of everything we do here, isn’t it?

“No,” some say. “That’s not right. You aren’t seeking God. When you confess your sins here every Sunday, you want to do the same sins again anyway.” In all honesty.... as we just confessed our sins before God, who actually thought of a sin? And can you still remember for which sins you’ve already asked forgiveness? It’s exactly at this point the prophet Isaiah would want to loudly exclaim:

10 Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 11 “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?”

“Your worship services are meaningless. Why? Because God is missing. You celebrate your worship service here Sunday after Sunday, not even thinking once about God, much less the people who live each day just outside the church doors. Then enormous sums of money are invested every year just so someone can stand up here and utter a few pious sayings, and also so that you can hear great music! All of this has no effect. Absolutely nothing happens.” And Isaiah, who would burst into the church like this, advises us rather to go outside before the door and distribute food to the poor because that would at least be useful.

On this day of prayer and repentance, we see a wide gulf between two aspects of worship. On one side is worship through our good deeds. On the other is worship as we hold it Sunday after Sunday with prayer, song, and the Lord’s Supper. One side sends the message is that we should reflect and find our rest in God. That the hectic pace of life should be silenced, so that God can speak. The other side sends exactly the opposite message: we should go out and do good instead of just listening to words! Both messages completely contradict each other, but both have a kernel of truth. On the one side there are people who never go to church. They say, I would rather give money to the poor. That is my act of worship. These people tell us that we concern ourselves only about worship services and not about the real needs of people. The prophet’s words we hear from Scripture today seem to be saying exactly that, at least at first. But be careful: Isaiah is not against worship services as such. We must make the whole thing clearer in our minds again. In Israelite worship at that time, the act of sacrificing went something like this: sacrifices would be made and a priest had to confirm after careful examination if the sacrifices were acceptable to God or not. But the priests were corrupt. They made a big spectacle over the examination of sacrifices. They were not really interested in what was going on in people’s hearts. It was only about status. That’s why the sacrifices of the rich were always regarded as pleasing to God while the sacrifices of the poor were despised. “God is pleased. Good, keep it up,” the priests said to the corrupt rich people. However, these rich people were anything but acceptable before God. For example, they mistreated their fellow human beings terribly and even sold them as slaves. Isaiah who speaks this sermon, seems to be disrupting this very ritual. He denounces this injustice without any introduction or preface. His voice is the voice of God when he says: “Such worship services are an abomination.” In fact, the real God hates such services and cannot endure them. It’s not about God wanting to completely eliminate worship services – Isaiah doesn’t want us to walk out of church in order to think only about the needs of others instead of also thinking about God. No, it’s about something entirely different. Namely that people had driven God out of the Temple with their wrongs. They continually increased their sacrifices, and their worship services continued to become more beautiful. But they placed themselves and their wishes on the throne of God. They replaced God with sin and injustice. In concrete terms, as it relates to us: If the worship service only had the purpose of satisfying our conscience so that we could continue to sin, Isaiah’s sermon would be intended precisely for us and we would have exchanged God for an idol. One would have to say with Paul: “Did Christ die so that we could go on sinning?” and with Paul answer: “By no means! All of us who are baptized into Christ have died to sin.” The saying also applies to us Christians that we cannot play with God’s righteousness. For us there is always the risk of the gap between what God wants and what we do simply become too wide. Because of that, we should not become complacent in a false sense of security. Isaiah could and should burst into our church from time to time and scold us. Yes, what would Isaiah even say to us today and how would he find us? When it comes to worship services, we can be proud. We almost never miss a worship service. And when it’s about actively helping the poor, we can show off our “Die Brücke” project. And if Isaiah, the astute prophet, would find mistakes in one or the other, we just have to polish our

shortcomings a little so that it's suitable again and we can join the conversation. When I hear the words of Isaiah, I think that it's not just about making a few corrections. Rather it's about something fundamental. When Isaiah stood there in the Temple and heard the priest solemnly declare that this or that sacrifice was acceptable to the living God, it burst out of him: It just had to be said very clearly for once. In this worship service, the very one they are allegedly worshiping is missing. God Himself! And that's what it's about in every worship service. A service to people.... even a diaconal service to people cannot be without God... and even if this service is still great and impressive, it's simply a human service and idolatry if the living God is missing. And a worship service without God is an abomination. Even if the music is so beautiful and everything works out technically perfectly.... but if the living God is missing, then it is purely sentimentalism. A lot can happen in the worship service. Everyone can be there. But one must not be missing. God Himself.

At the Holy Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus made this very clear once again. Exactly at the height of the festival, when water from the Siloam spring was intended to be poured onto the altar, the voice of our Lord shouted in the crowd: "Whoever believes in Me, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." At that time, Jesus didn't go around selecting the best people to worship at the service. They weren't the righteous people. Some of them weren't even respectable people. One could even say that they were clearly the dregs of society: deceivers, immoral, impure... but one thing they didn't lack: Jesus Himself. That's how worship is with us. He true man and true God, fully Jesus. We want to place Him in the center, and we want to hear Him. When Jesus is in the center, then worship is more than just an event. The worship service is the source of life from which the life of our Lord Jesus flows and flows and flows. Just as God gives us food and drink, He gives us Jesus, so that we can live and spread life. Isaiah calls this faith. And this faith has such a strength that our blood red sins become white as snow. That's why this day of prayer and repentance anything but a sad day. Rather it is a joyful expectation and a prayer: Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me! Amen.