

"The Greatest Seduction"

Isaiah 2:1-22

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The prophet Isaiah lived through the reigns of four kings, witnessing the rise of Assyria, the destruction of Samaria, and the siege of Jerusalem. For forty years, he attacked hypocrisy, immorality, luxurious living, idolatrous cults, and above all, the apostasy of his people- the Jews. He urged Judah to repent in order to escape judgement in the terrible Day of the Lord. But his message wasn't all negative. Isaiah always held out the possibility of peace and reconciliation, foreseeing a day when all the nations would come together to worship God. Proclaiming that God would never abrogate his covenant with Israel, he assured them that God would preserve a holy remnant, with the birth of the child "Emmanuel" as proof of his faithfulness. If his words served to prick the conscience of Judah, they would also keep her hope alive during the ensuing years of oppression and exile.

Chapter two of Isaiah, this morning's scripture lesson, is a study in contrast. It begins with a beautiful vision of peace and righteousness, but ends with the fearful prospect of judgement. In the Last Days, the House of the Lord will be established and all the nations shall flow to it. Justice shall reign and swords and spears will be beat into farm implements, inaugurating an age of unprecedented peace. But with verse 6, Isaiah's prophecy takes a swift and terrible turn- from the great promise of the future to the dreadful reality of the present. After exhorting Israel to "walk in the light of Jehovah," he proceeds to show them just how far they have withdrawn from that light: by their magical practices, by commercial greed, by ostentation and luxury, and by their idolatry. The result must be the punishment of God's people. Their colossal arrogance and pride must be humbled so that the Lord ALONE will be exalted in that day. So long as they remain disobedient and proud, God will never be able to use them to accomplish his purposes in the world.

With the anger of God kindled, Isaiah now completes his prophecy with a description of the "Day of the Lord." In that day, God will bring down every person or object that exalts itself against him. His anger shall be directed, not just at persons, but upon the trees, mountains, hills, towers, walls, ships, and their idols. It will create alarm and terrify all creation, causing men to fly and hide themselves in caves. Then they will discover the impotency of the very idols they have trusted for so long and reject them.

In the final verse, Isaiah punctuates his prophecy with a final warning: "Turn away from man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?" In this powerful statement, the great prophet predicted the utter destruction of everything which ministers to the pride and vain confidence of men. Accordingly, there must be a renunciation of trust in man and everything that belongs to him. In sum, the worth of man, regarded in himself and altogether apart from God, is really NOTHING.

Isaiah's prophecy goes to the very heart of God's relationship with his people. Judah had become an exceedingly proud and idolatrous nation, no longer trusting God but relying instead upon

the idols of their growing wealth, their expanding military production, and their massive construction projects. God was now judging them, promising that the day would come when every rank and title would fail; every tower and wall become leveled; every sword and chariot be crushed; every book and work of art be reduced to dust. The pride of accumulated civilizations--Egypt's pyramids, Persia's palaces, Greece's temples, Rome's amphitheaters--would totter and come crashing down. NOTHING would stand that human energy, skill, and ingenuity had constructed--on that day, God promised, it would all disappear.

The sin at the bottom of all their disobedience was the sin of "arrogance" or "pride." Of the classic "seven deadly sins," pride heads the list; it is the seed that gives birth to all the others. Augustine held that "pride is the beginning of sin," pride being the self-exaltation that results from building our lives around ourselves and our own interests rather than those of God. Pride is the denial of God and his authority and make OURSELVES "god" in his place. Pride occurs when I treat my own self as ultimate, when I trust MYSELF more than I trust God. It is to make ourselves direct competitors with God, a competition that man can NEVER win. Pride is thus the father of all lies- a form of self-deception that foolishly convinces us that the creature can dethrone the Creator. It is to fall for the same deception as Adam and Eve who BELIEVED the serpent when he told them that by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would become like God. Pride is an attack upon the very person of God himself--attacking his integrity and his word--and God must respond by judging it as swiftly and decisively as he did his own people. As those familiar words from Proverbs warn us, "pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (16:18).

In Isaiah's passage, we can see that pride is also closely connected to "idolatry." When we hear the word "idolatry," we tend to think of it only in terms of graven images, statues, and altars. It is our pride that leads us to mistakenly believe that only the ancient pagans like the Persians or the Romans, or perhaps the most primitive of modern cultures, surrounded themselves with idols. Idolatry, however, is much more subtle than that. Our modern-day idols are certainly VERY-MUCH present- in our glorification and adoration of youth and beauty, wealth and power. Our contemporary idols have become our bank accounts, our homes, our cars, our jobs, our health, and even our looks. Evidence of idolatry in our lives is found in the way that our fragile self-esteem is defined by and dependent upon how we look or the number of possessions we own or how many lives we control. But when the wrinkles set in and all the objects in our lives are gone and the power is suddenly stripped from us, we are then left with nothing- our idols have deserted us. It's only THEN we realize just how hollow and ephemeral they all were, that we had trusted in nothing but air.

But if idols populate our personal life, they no less figure prominently in our NATIONAL life. We find them represented in our great military machines and vast nuclear arsenals, in our sophisticated scientific technologies and even our promotion of the "American way." Many businessmen speak of the "gospel of free-market capitalism," and their advertising often has a distinctly religious tone to it. Some of these you may remember: "Datsun Saves," "Buick, Something to Believe In," "K-Mart Is Your Saving Place," "Keep That Great GM Feeling," "The Spirit of Marlboro," "The Good News of Home Heating," "GE: We bring good things to life." And so for many Americans, money, sex, drugs, alcohol, work, sports, freedom, or even the flag serve as

"gods"- the supreme articles of our faith, our ultimate source of security. As William Stringfellow, a Christian critic of a generation ago, has written concerning the sins of Babylon:

"Babylon's futility is her idolatry--her boast of justifying significance or moral ultimacy in her destiny, her reputation, her capabilities, her authority, her glory as a nation. The moral pretenses of Imperial Rome, the millennial claims of Nazism, the arrogance of Marxist dogma, the anxious insistence that America be 'number one' among nations are all versions of Babylon's idolatry. All share in this grandiose view of the nation by which the principality assumes the place of God in the world."

Christians, AS WELL, have their own idols, whether we're speaking of our denominational affiliation, the church building, or even our particular brand of theology. To say that Christians are idolatrous does not mean that they dispense with the worship of the Lord, but that they simply include the worship of OTHER gods as well. We want God's life, but we also want the "good life" too. We seem to believe that we can pay homage to our many cultural idols and still retain our integrity as God's people.

Idolatry has its genesis in the human heart. Where we put our heart is where we orient our life, and where we orient our life tells us where we are putting our faith. We are forever attempting, however feebly, to generate our OWN security, whether by trying to maximize our finances or consolidate our power. The lie, seductively created by power and money, is the illusion that with one more dollar in our wallet or that one big job promotion, we will finally be satisfied. If we can eliminate the competitors and become number one, the top dog, king of the hill, then the gnawing fear and insecurity we feel will finally have been arrested- the beast will hunger no more, or so we tell ourselves. But the sad reality, and one we rarely ever learn, is that the anxiety still remains and EVEN DEEPENS and all the power and money in all the world cannot hide or eradicate that dread or insecurity. Martin Luther King, Jr. had this to say about all the idolatry and pride that is so much a part of American culture, a critique which could no less be addressed to all the other advanced cultures presently in our world:

"There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods rather than God. We have genuflected before the god of science only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate. We have worshipped the god of pleasure only to discover that thrills play out and sensations are short-lived. We have bowed before the god of money only to learn that there are such things as love and friendship that money cannot buy and that in a world of possible depressions, stock market crashes, and bad business investments, money is a rather uncertain deity. These transitory gods are not able to save or bring happiness to the human heart. Only God is able. It is faith in Him that we must rediscover."

I've spent most of my sermon speaking about two very different kingdoms with two very different orientations, two very distinct and contrary states of heart and mind, and now I want to conclude by contrasting two figures who embody those differences so you can better understand the contrast and what it is God calls US to this morning. I love sports and as much as I love professional football and college basketball, BASEBALL will always be my first love. As most of you know, there is currently a lockout going on and unfortunately all negotiations between the owners and the players have presently reached a stalemate. As a result, the baseball commissioner

has decreed that the season will not be opening as originally scheduled. Hence, for those of you needing some kind of baseball fix, I'm going to end my sermon with a baseball illustration.

It's hard to find a greater contrast than one between two of the game's greatest players- Tyrus Raymond Cobb, the "Georgia Peach," and Jackie Roosevelt Robinson, the man who broke the color barrier. Aside from both being Southerners and their mutual love for baseball, these two could never have been more different. For over twenty years, beginning in 1905, Ty Cobb was considered the greatest hitter of all time, a man who led the league in batting twelve out of thirteen years, who hit over .400 three times and went on to compile the highest lifetime batting average (.367) in the history of the sport. But for all his brilliance on the diamond, his personal life was nothing short of a disaster. For Cobb, baseball was war, a struggle for supremacy, the survival of the fittest; his intensity and drive was unparalleled. When he was in fifth grade, he beat up a fat boy whose error had let the girls team win a spelling bee. Pursued by demons from his childhood, his parentage, and his racial consciousness, he took out all of his aggressions on the playing fields. Everyone was his enemy and even his own teammates despised him. When his team thought that he had lost a batting title, his fellow ballplayers sent a congratulating note to the man who beat him.

Cobb developed ulcers, slept with a revolver under his pillow, and developed an excessive hatred toward all African Americans. One day, when a black groundskeeper tried to shake his hand, Cobb slapped him, chased him into the dugout, and then tried to strangle the poor man's wife when she came to his aid. When the team attempted to pull him off, he tried to punch them too! Another time, he chased a heckler into the stands and began stomping his shoe spikes into him. When some tried to rescue the spectator, explaining that the man was handicapped and didn't have any hands, Cobb replied, "I don't care if he doesn't have legs. I'll kill the s.o.b." He once admitted, "If I hadn't been determined to beat the others at all costs, I doubt I could hit .320." His need to be number one was paramount. After one game, he returned to his hotel room to discover his roommate already soaking in the bathtub. He violently threw him out, explaining, "Don't you understand? I HAVE to be first."

After baseball, he spent much of his life drinking, gambling, quarrelling with waitresses, taxi drivers, and sales clerks, deploring the integration of the game, charging fans for his autograph, and driving off two wives. He stayed on the road as long as he could carrying everywhere with him a luger and a paper bag filled with a million dollars in securities, each day swallowing a quart of bourbon mixed with milk to dull the pain. "Where's anybody who cares about me? The world's lousy, no damn good," he complained. When Cobb died of cancer, on July 17, 1961 at the age of 74, 400 persons showed up for his funeral in Royston, Ga., most of them little leaguers for whom he was nothing more than a name. Only three ballplayers whom he had played with bothered to attend. Towards the end, he told one caller, "If I'd had my life to live over again, I'd have done things a little different- I'd have had more friends." Ty Cobb, for all his talent and great gifts, was a terribly lonely, tortured man.

Jackie Robinson, on the other hand, was as great a human being as he was a ballplayer. When Branch Rickey determined to integrate the game, he was looking for someone with the strength of character to endure all the taunts and jeers that would inevitably ensue. Jackie was just that man. Yes, he received death threats, was called every kind of racial epithet, and even some of

his own players refused to take the field with him. But with great dignity and self-control, he prevailed because he knew that what he was accomplishing was for far more than just himself- it was for his PEOPLE as well. He was convinced that if the racial barrier could be broken in baseball, the rest of the barriers would soon fall too. He led his team, the Brooklyn Dodgers, to a succession of pennants in the early fifties and finally to their first world championship in 1955. When he finally retired after the '56 season, he immersed himself totally in the struggle for civil rights.

Like Arthur Ashe, he transcended the sport he was so very good at. When he died in August, 1972, the streets were lined with people of all color who felt they had lost a great leader. In his eulogy, the Rev. Jesse Jackson said, "Jackie as a figure in history was a rock in the water, creating concentric circles and ripples of new possibilities. He was medicine. He was immunized by God from catching the diseases that he fought. The Lord's arms of protection enabled him to go through danger seen and unseen, and he had the capacity to wear glory with grace." He concluded by reminding the congregation that Jackie Robinson had stolen home and was "safe". Buried not far from where Ebbetts Field once stood, the epitaph to his grave read, "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives."

Thus, we confront two great talents but with two very different conclusions. Ty Cobb was a venal man whose character was poisoned by pride and selfishness and assorted hatreds. His achievements were considerable, unparalleled in the history of the game, and yet despite his great wealth and tremendous success in the world, none of it could carry over into his personal life. JACKIE ROBINSON, on the other hand, inspired millions by his courageous example. Yes, he was proud man, especially proud of his race, but it was not the kind of pride that sets one up and apart from everyone else. It was a humility and a quiet dignity which reminded people that he was a child of God, worthy of the same respect and opportunities as any OTHER child of God. There was no segregation in heaven, and there shouldn't be any here on earth. He was a Christian man who refused to live for himself. Rather, he gave himself to a higher, much nobler cause, and the people loved him for it.

In our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah began with a picture of heaven and ended with a portrait of hell. Between the two, he painted the realities of Judah's condition- her pride and arrogance, her love of luxury and abandonment of the poor, for which, if she continued in her ways, she would be harshly judged. The prophet was presenting his people with two choices, two clear alternatives. If she continued to build her own security, without the presence of God in her life, it would one day all come to nought. However, if she made GOD her security; if she were to recognize the ephemerality of her achievements--that all her armies, her opulence, and her high walls were, in fact, NO security but would instead leave her even more INSECURE--then God could take his rightful place in Judah's midst and restore her to the glory he had promised their forefathers.

When God is not in the center of one's life, one's purposes, one's will, that void must then be filled by something else, usually an idol of one's own making. Because every person wants to constitute him or herself as the center of things, they become deeply divided from one another with clashing and competing interests. Humanity is reduced to a giant spectacle of confusion, each one driven by his or her own personal wants and desires. But if Jesus Christ is made the center of one's

life and labors, when man stands in humbleness before God, walking in his commandments, believing in his promises of love and constant protection, then he has a new confidence, a profound trust that allows him to become a neighbor to his brother and sister. God's wants and desires become the center of one's life. And because God forms the center, man won't be aimlessly and arbitrarily guided by his instinct and egotism. We won't ever again have to fear one another or look upon the person next to us as a threat or enemy. Rather, we come one step closer to realizing Isaiah's vision of heaven- one that awaits ALL God's children in the Last Day. Amen and amen.