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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Who's in Church?

People have stopped going to church. Worship attendance is down. The church is dying. These are often repeated statements, these days—and they are true in many cases and places. Summer Sundays can be especially thin. Contrast this with a couple decades ago, when cultural expectations had people going to church every Sunday. What else was there to do? Plus, if you didn't, people thought ill of you. Also, if you didn't, God would send you somewhere even hotter than this sanctuary in summer. So some said. It was different back then, back when pastors were selling fire insurance, back when worship was something people did, back when church was a growth industry. Things have changed now. You hear about this in the news, in Pew surveys, you can see it yourself: going to church is now the exception, not the rule. (You are all exceptional people!) These changing patterns of religious behavior make some people worried. I am not immune to such concern. Some days I think, "Oh dear, where is everyone? What does this mean for our future?"

It was a different situation in ancient Israel, back at the time of the prophet Isaiah. Back then the Temple was packed with people. Everyone went to worship. Well, not everyone. Full as the sanctuary was, there was someone who had stopped attending: God. As we hear in today's first reading, God had a real problem with what was going on in worship. God announced to Isaiah in a vision, "I have had enough!" God says, "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? ... Your appointed festivals my soul hates." Or as it may also be translated, "they make me nauseous." For someone who spends a good amount of time planning and promoting worship, it can be hard to hear that it makes God sick. God goes on, "They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them." And then God says, and this is the most challenging part of all, "When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen." God will stop going to church.

Now, God is not saying, "You shouldn't bother going either." On the contrary, God has given us a commandment saying that we should. It's in God's top ten: Remember the Sabbath. Moreover, in other parts of the Old Testament there's a lot about those appointed festivals God has just trashed, a lot about just how they should be celebrated. I love liturgy, but those parts of the Bible make my eyes glaze over. Today's reading from Isaiah ought to make any pastor, anyone in a pew, pay attention, today's reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah offers a strong wake-up call about what Sabbath observance really looks like. This theme, by the way, is found not just in Isaiah, but in Psalms and other parts of the Bible as well, including the New Testament. Jesus says very similar things, at one point Jesus says something like this in the Temple while turning over tables.

What's God's problem with worship? Sure, the Temple is full, but it's full of hypocrites. The people forget the Sabbath as soon as they leave the sanctuary, even before they leave it. You wouldn't know that they've been there from what they do. Treating one another fairly and gently? That wasn't happening. Keeping an eye out for others, especially those who have it especially hard? Nope. Seeing and acknowledging how much they've been given, having a sense of reverence and gratitude and expressing that in relationships with others and the world? Not a characteristic of the age. "Not going to listen to you," God says. God has harsh things to

say to worshippers who do not live according to the justice and mercy that are the heart and intention of all of God's commandments. It can be said to full churches. It can be said to half full churches, too. It's a pretty good way to empty out churches.

Is this what has happened to the church today? Have churches dwindled because people see how hypocritical church people can be? In some cases, sadly, yes. You may know people who have been hurt by church. You may be one who has been hurt by church. We need to ask ourselves if we are living out the church's call: calling people to God, or pushing them away. As we survey the religious landscape, we must also be on guard against false nostalgia. Sometimes these days people look back a couple decades ago and think things were better back then, back when everyone went to church. And then they sigh, "Things have changed."

Things have changed, for the church, and in the church. Because the church has changed I am able to be a pastor, am able to preach and preside at Holy Communion. Because the church has changed our music director was able to marry his husband here in this sanctuary. Because the church has changed our synod elected an African American man, Yehiel Curry, as our new bishop. I know Yehiel and a little bit of his story. He didn't grow up in the Lutheran church; he found it—grace found him—as an adult. Sort of like what happened with Martin Luther, to whom this church traces a key part of its heritage. Martin Luther didn't grow up Lutheran. None of the first Lutherans did. They all arrived to it after some time; they were all immigrants, ideologically. The first Lutherans were all immigrants from the Catholicism of the day; a Catholicism no longer in keeping with the holy catholic faith; the first Lutherans they were all refugees from a church that needed to change. The first Lutherans in America were also immigrants, from Sweden or Germany or other places in Europe. Immigration is very much a historical and biblical element of the church, as is emphasized in today's second reading. Our ancestor in the faith Abraham was an immigrant. Abraham traveled to another country, by faith seeking a better life, seeking change.

The church has changed, should be changing, change is a key thing the church offers people. This is not to say that all change is good, nor that it is easy. It is often very, very painful. The church as it was is dying, but Christians know that death is not the final word, death precedes resurrection. The church is a growth industry, still—and always: the church is in the business of helping people grow in faith, grow in hope, grow in love. The church can no longer take it for granted that people will just come. We will need to change our behaviors.

As a church professional, I worry about the church, the church at large, this church in particular. Sometimes those ominous statements and predictions that all around and are not invalid fill me with the fear Jesus warns his flock against. "Have no fear little flock," Jesus says in today's gospel reading. "We are little," I think. And, "Oh dear, what does this mean for our future?" Oh me of little faith. It's not my job to worry. It's not any of our jobs. The future is not in our hands, it's in God's hands, as Jesus also says, as today's gospel continues. The kingdom is coming, the Master, the Son of Man, God's future is coming, we don't know when. Until then, this is our job: be ready. Here are some ways we can be ready, as noted by Isaiah: Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Plead for the widow. When we do those things, we worship. When we do those things, we affirm God's promise, given to us at the table and when even just two or three are gathered, we are graced with God's presence. And we know that yes, God goes to church here.