# Scarlet and Crimson

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Scriptures: Isaiah 1:1—20, Hebrews 11:1-3, Luke 12:32-40

Usually, when we read the words of a prophet, we get either a word of warning or a word of comfort. How we like the words of comfort! They bring us words about a God whom we enjoy, who promises to bring us through our miseries and into something new. This is the nurturing God, who gave us birth; like children seeking solace from their mother, we like to be with this God. This is the strong God, powerful to save; like children seeking a Father who protects them, we like to be with this God.

But the prophets also bring words of warning, and we need to pay these words their proper attention. We don’t like these words! They bring us words about a God we’d prefer to avoid, words that remind us of our “sin-sick souls.” This is the stern God who chides us; like children who have been told to “wait until their father gets home,” we want to hide and not be found. This is the disappointed God, who sees that we do not live up to expectations; like children who fear to disappoint their mother with their school grades, we try to pretend we haven’t been graded and found wanting.

In the first chapter of Isaiah, we find mostly warnings, given to the land of Judah. We find them chastised for their sins of commission and their sins of omission. Judah is stupider than a donkey; at least donkeys know who their masters are. Their children are brought up in wickedness and rebellion. They are like people who are bruised from head to toe from their beatings, but they seem to ask for more.

Frankly, the Lord is sick of these people and their worship. They crowd into the temple, making their blood sacrifices, and the Lord has had enough. When the worship services start, the Lord, the one who is to be honored and worshipped, just finds it all a burden; he doesn’t even want to hear their prayers. He is disgusted with them, really — when they raise up their hands in prayer, what the Lord sees are blood-soaked, murderous hands. What God required of them was to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and widow. Instead, they have blood on their hands.

Just spend a minute on that image, as unpleasant as it may be. Just imagine a man at prayer and perhaps he uncovers the prayer shawl over his head. But his hands are soaked with blood, and it drips on the shawl, staining it. A woman kneels and raises her arms out to pray, but blood drips down her arm, staining her dress, dripping on the floor.

Are you offended by this? Are you disgusted? That’s the picture Isaiah is painting; that’s the vision that God sees of the people of Judah — people, dripping with the blood of their own failures and sins, offensive and unpleasant.

But. “Though your sins be as scarlet” — as scarlet as blood is scarlet — “Though they are red like crimson” — as blood is crimson — “they shall be like snow,” “like wool.” It is contingent on being willing and obedient; if they are, all will be well; if they are not, they will be “devoured by the sword.”

Since we know that many of them were devoured by the sword, as the invaders came in, destroyed their cities and stole their populations, we might guess how Isaiah would have judged their actions.

Later, Jesus comes. In our passage today, he doesn’t address Israel or Judah, but his “little flock.” He speaks of a God of pleasure; it is God’s good pleasure to give them — this little flock — they kingdom. He doesn’t come to warn them, or even to comfort them, but to call them to a new way of living. Like Isaiah, Jesus calls them to live a life of doing good, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed. Specifically, here, he calls them to give up their possessions and give the money to the poor. In doing so, they are storing their treasures not on earth, but in this new kingdom of heaven, “where no thief comes near, and no moth destroys.” Like servants awaiting their master’s imminent return, they should be watching for the Son of Man to come, and fully bring about the kingdom.

Where does this leave us, 21st century disciples of Jesus, who was brought up in the world and imagery of Isaiah? How do we read Isaiah’s warning for ourselves? How do we read Jesus’s call to sell our possessions? Do we go about doing good, seeking justice and rescuing the oppressed? Whose blood do we have on our hands? Will the master come and find us faithful?

I can’t see into your hearts, but I can see into my own, and I can see what the church worldwide is like, and what the church in history has been like. A mixture of some good, and some very bad; from time to time, very, very good, but usually complaisant and compromised and corrupted. Should we not fear?

Perhaps. But we remember the words of Isaiah,

Though your sins are like scarlet,   
they shall be like snow;   
though they are red like crimson,   
they shall become like wool.[[1]](#footnote-1)

And we remember that it was Jesus who came, who died his bloody death, somehow taking on our sins, and making us as clean as the freshest snow or the purest wool. It is God’s good pleasure to announce that the doors to the kingdom are open, and it is ours for the taking. We are empowered to start on the journey to be people who can bear up under God’s goodness, to create a world of justice, and a people where no one is oppressed, not orphans, not widows, not the poor; no one needs be left out, for all are invited in to enjoy the master’s presence.

The author of Hebrews reminds us, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Paul reminds us that we see in part, and know in part. What is God’s call on your life? Is it to start the journey? To sell off some possessions and buy heavenly treasure? Is it some other sign of the kingdom coming? What are you doing as we await the master’s return?

1. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Is 1:18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)