

**Theme: “Stop!”**

**Isaiah 1:16-18 (EHV)**

**<sup>16</sup> Wash yourselves. Purify yourselves. Remove your evil deeds from my sight.  
Stop doing evil. <sup>17</sup> Learn to do good. Seek justice. Relieve the oppressed.  
Seek justice for the fatherless. Plead for the widow.  
<sup>18</sup> Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD.  
Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow.  
Though they are as red as crimson, they will be like wool.**

Do you know what a “California stop” is? Have you ever heard that expression before? It’s when a driver comes to a stop sign at an intersection and slows down, but doesn’t actually stop and instead just drives right through the intersection. I heard this expression long before I moved here, but living at the corner of a three-way stop, trust me, I’ve seen and confirmed many times that a “California stop” is most definitely a thing! Obviously that is not a good or safe driving practice, but many people do it (and not just in California). Whenever I see someone do a “California stop” at our intersection in front of our house I think about a joke I once heard:

A man did a “California stop” at a stop sign and just rolled right through the intersection without coming to a complete stop. A police car happened to be trailing him and pulled the man over. The driver tried to argue with the police officer, “I looked both ways, no one was coming. I slowed down!” The police officer proceeded to take out his baton and started bopping the driver on his head. “Ouch!” the driver cried out, “What are you doing!?” The officer replied, “Do you want me to slow down, or stop?”

In our text for today we hear God having to “lay down the law” to His Old Testament people. In fact, if you were to read through the verses from Isaiah chapter one that precede our sermon text you would see that God speaks very harshly and severely against the sins of the people of Judah and Jerusalem. What was the problem? It wasn’t that they weren’t following God’s directions for worship and the offerings they were bringing to him. They actually *were* doing those things. The problem was the attitude of their heart. Their worship had become a work they were doing to try and earn God’s love and favor. It was hypocritical and therefore worthless in the sight of God. Their worship, offerings, prayers, and songs were not focused on the undeserved gift of God’s grace given to them in the promised Messiah who was to come, instead they had made their worship services into a show of their religious devotion in an attempt to somehow earn God’s free gift.

God spoke these harsh and fear-instilling words of His Law to His people through Isaiah for the purpose of turning their hearts back to Him in repentance. And so, we hear God’s words in the first two verses of our text, **“Remove your evil deeds from my sight. Stop doing evil. <sup>17</sup> Learn to do good.” (v. 16b–17a).**

These words of God are, of course, as important for us to hear as surely as they were for God’s Old Testament people. We too need to hear the harsh words of God’s Law turning our hearts away from our sins, our hypocrisy, and our misguided efforts to try and somehow earn God’s love and favor by our good works—or even by our worship and offerings to Him. We need to hear God’s words of correction and discipline when we find ourselves distracted by so many things in our lives and the world around us, especially during this time of year in which we should be focusing our hearts, minds, and lives on the Gift that God sent from heaven to save us, His Son, Jesus Christ. And what does God say to us in His words of Law through the prophet Isaiah? Does He say, “slow down your sins?” No, He says, **“Remove your evil deeds from my sight. Stop doing evil. <sup>17</sup> Learn to do good.” (v. 16b–17a).**

The problem is that we suffer from the same kind of “heart trouble” as God’s Old Testament people. This is a problem which we can in no way fix by ourselves. Again, we must look to our God and His Word.

Thankfully, the message God gives His people through Isaiah is not only that we “stop doing evil” and “learn to do good,” but also a message of invitation to receive His mercy and grace. If those words of God’s Law from the first half of our text applied to us, then we are also included in these words of cleansing and forgiveness we read in the second half of our text: **“Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD. Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow. Though they are as red as crimson, they will be like wool” (v. 18).**

By our sinful natures, there is no way we can **“Remove our evil deeds from [God’s] sight”** or completely **“stop doing evil”** and only do what is good, as His holy Law demands. Our only hope of forgiveness and salvation has to come from Him! In His mercy and grace that salvation for us and for all people of all time came to us in the form of His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. He is the one who kept the requirements of God’s holy Law for us and only did what is good. He is the one who **“removed our evil deeds from [God’s] sight”** by washing the **“scarlet”** stains of our sins in His shed blood on that cross so that now we are **“as white as snow”** in God’s sight. That is the “Good News” that we celebrate and focus on as we begin this season of Advent—the “coming” of God’s great Gift of our Savior, Jesus!

As we begin this Advent season let me also encourage all of us, not just to “slow down” our busy lives during this hectic month of December and all of the outward Christmas preparations, but to actually **“Stop!”** Stop and take the time to listen to what God is saying to us through His Word each day. Be like Mary, as we read again in those familiar words from our Gospel reading for today, who in the midst of what must have been an incredibly busy, distracting, frenzied—but wonderful!—day, we are told, **“But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19).**

As we buy the gifts, bake the cookies, put up our Christmas trees, and hang the lights, let’s also take some time to **“Stop!”**

Not only to **stop** the things in our lives that are not God pleasing—things that add to the darkness of our lives and the world around us; the things God calls you to **“stop”** doing—but also to **“stop”** and think about the Savior God sent to wash us clean from our sins forever. Moved by His love and grace, may we then also **“Stop!”** and think ways we can let our light shine—individually and collectively as members of this congregation and the body of Christ—so that more people may come to know and believe in Jesus, the Light of the World!

This season of Advent let’s all take the time to **“Stop, Look, and Listen,”** and prepare for the coming of our Savior. Amen.