

Ps 17:3
Ps 19:3,5
Ps 85:2,3,4
Ps 119:39,40,41,
Ps 37:12; Hy 29:1
Isaiah 8:16-22
Romans 1:18-32
Isaiah 8:20a

Yarrow, January 16, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

From where is one to get answers to life's tough questions? At the end of the day, you can source your answers from two possible directions. You can look for answers from earth; you can also look for answers from heaven. In heaven is the throne of the sovereign Creator who rules over all; on earth are all the creatures He has made. The two sources from which you can seek your answers are, then, either the Creator or creatures – and of the latter group there are countless talking heads that will give you advice.

Fallen humanity wants answers that suit our itching ears. That makes it very difficult for us to bend our ear to heaven's answers; the answers of the living God run against our sinful grain. Yet precisely this is the instruction of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah: seek your answers from heaven! Those answers come via the Word He spoke, Holy Scripture.

I summarize the sermon this morning with this theme:

GOD TELLS HIS PEOPLE: TO THE LAW AND TO THE TESTIMONY!

1. Why is this instruction given?
2. How is this instruction valuable?
3. So what?

1. Why is this instruction given?

The prophet Isaiah has had to speak some pointed words to the people of Jerusalem. Though King Ahaz was singularly ungodly, the people of Judah and Jerusalem were quite comfortable with his godlessness. According to God's own promises in the covenant He'd formed with Israel, His judgment invariably had to follow. It did, inasmuch as the kings of Judah's two northern neighbours had sent their armies to fight against Jerusalem, overthrow Ahaz, and now sought to set up their own puppet as king in Jerusalem (cf 7:1,6). Yet the Lord did not wish to give success to those two kings; it was His intent to destroy them soon and press His hand of judgment on the people through the armies of the dreaded king of Assyria (7:17,20).

To drive home to the people of Jerusalem and Judah that this was indeed the Lord's plan, He had the prophet Isaiah put up this billboard in Jerusalem shouting out the words "Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz" (8:1) – a phrase meaning 'Quick to the Plunder; Swift to the Spoil'. The point of the billboard was that the people of Jerusalem should know that devastation was coming, and it would come so quickly that there's no mention of the fight or the suffering; there's mention only of the enemy's victory as pointed up by the fact that they plunder the city.

As if a billboard with this highly unpopular message were not enough, the Lord had Isaiah give his newborn son the very same name as was written on that billboard. We for our part can well imagine the jeers and the chuckles that followed when word got out about the big name the silly prophet gave his tiny newborn; 'that guy's lost it', 'poor kid, with a name like that and a Dad like that'.... The long and short: the people of Judah and of Jerusalem, and the king also, did not take the prophet's words seriously. And truth be said: we don't find that so surprising.... His message wouldn't be welcome to our ears either.... Far too much doom and gloom....

But: no one could dispute that life was tough. Those two kings of Israel and Syria surrounded the city, and that had obvious consequences for food supply and for commerce. The newspapers were reporting the growing strength of the Assyrian army, and would this new power be Jerusalem's friend or enemy?? What was the wise way forward in the politics of the time? Was it wise to build a new home now? Was it a good time to expand your business? Was now a time to marry or to bring forth children? So many questions....

And that raises the big question: where was one to go to find answers?? We say: turn to the Scriptures. That's what we've learned from Isaiah: "to the law and to the testimony!" Given that the people of Judah are God's children by covenant (just like we are), we'd expect them to pull out their Bibles and get themselves and their families more deeply involved in Bible study... and of course prayer. But that's not what happened in Jerusalem. If it did happen, the Lord's command in our text would have no place: "to the law...!" (And we need to know that the term translated for us as 'law' is the Hebrew word 'Torah', which in turn describes the five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). No, instead of engaging in Bible study, the people of Judah and Jerusalem responded to the challenges of the day by –vs 19– consulting mediums and spiritists. From Isaiah 3:2f we learn that soothsayers and enchanters were as commonly accepted in Jerusalem as judges and prophets and elders and counsellors.

What, now, are we to understand by mediums and spiritists? The term translated as 'mediums' appears in Samuel's account of King Saul consulting the witch of Endor; she was a medium. The 'medium' plays the role of the middleman in a conversation between the living and the dead, in this case in a conversation between King Saul and the deceased prophet Samuel. The assumption here is that the deceased have insights into the world 'out there' that the living do not have; they have, after all, departed this life to enter the world of the spirits – and so (so goes the logic) have access to information about what is going to happen.... King Saul wanted to get hold of that information so that he could in turn make a more informed decision about the coming battle..., and the people of Judah were doing precisely the same thing in their day in relation to the questions of their lives. The word translated as 'spiritists' comes from the Hebrew word for 'knowledge' and always appears together with the word 'mediums', likely as an explanation of what the medium is after: knowledge from the 'other world'.

A couple of questions arise. Is it true that once a loved one has died (and therefore enters the realm of the dead) he therefore has access to what the future will bring? A second question: can the living in fact contact the dead – be it directly, be it through a medium? Let's be clear: many religions, old or modern, are convinced that Yes, departed loved ones have access to the plans of the gods, and are even in a position to lean on the gods to give their loved ones on earth a break. Many peoples also believe that there are ways to contact a deceased grandmother and learn through her what the gods have in store for you.

The living God speaks very differently. Those who die in the Lord go to be with the Lord in glory, and they are delighted by what they see of God's glory. Their focus is *Him* and His praise, and not the

needs of their loved ones on earth. More, we on earth are not able to get in contact with our deceased loved ones and are certainly not able to pick their deceased brains (be it directly or through a medium) for information about what is going to happen. That arrangement of things agrees fully with the way the Creator ordained things in the beginning – for He created people to image Him and part and parcel of that set up was that God would speak to His covenant partner directly, even as people could speak to Him directly in prayer. Though He was in heaven and man on earth, it was the will of the Lord that there should be direct communication between Him in heaven and man on earth, and so God actually spoke to certain people – think of Adam in Paradise, Cain after he killed Abel, Noah before the flood, Moses at Mt Sinai, and so many more. After He spoke with these people (we confess in Article 3 of the *Belgic Confession*) God “in His special care for us and our salvation, ... commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing...” It is the marvel of His mercy: He has not left mankind in the dark as to what His will or His plans might be! He has told us His plans, told the human race how to receive His blessing and how to receive His curse – and caused His answers to be preserved over the generations.

That in turn is why He flatly forbade His people to tolerate mediums and spiritists in their midst. He established His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai, spoke to them directly in the Ten Commandments and then indirectly through Moses as His chosen mouthpiece, and then gave this command in Leviticus 19: “Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God” (vs 31; cf Exodus 22:18). Just before His people entered the Promised Land the Lord gave this instruction: “Let no one be found among you who ... practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or cast spells, or who is medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you” (Deuteronomy 18:10ff). You hear it: consulting mediums is what the Canaanites were doing – and in so doing they provoked the Lord’s jealousy because they were ignoring how *He was pleased to speak to people*, and so pushing aside too what He was saying.

That is why in turn David could speak so positively of the Word of God. Ps 119: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (vs 105). God hasn’t kept us in the dark, but revealed His plans to His people *through His Word*. So the church dares to say: “We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein” (Article 7, *Belgic Confession*). Note the word ‘fully’ and the phrase ‘all that man must believe in order to be saved’ – and ‘saved’ does not refer simply to entering heaven but refers to how to escape the judgment of God in the crunch of this life. The point of the confession: the Bible is so complete that it may not be ignored as one seeks answers to the questions of daily living.

But see: as God’s own people in Jerusalem in the days of King Ahaz sought answers to the pressing questions raised by the armies besieging their city, they did not devote themselves to Bible study, but opted instead to consult mediums and spiritists! Here was a blatant affront to the living God; though His care for His people by covenant was such that He gave them answers *in His Word* they chose to find answers elsewhere. Instead of appreciating the preaching of the gospel as it was to happen in the temple (it didn’t happen there; Ahaz closed the doors of the temple, cf 2 Chron 29:3), and instead of welcoming the word the Lord sent through His servants the prophets, they waltzed over to the mediums, paid their shekels for an insight, and thought themselves privileged with the whisperings and mutterings of the necromancer. Says the Lord: that’s stupid! Vs 19: “Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?” The physically dead know nothing; how can they assist the living?! The spiritually dead know nothing either; how can the mediums –they live in sin because they ignore the living God

and ignore to the means He has chosen to reveal Himself— how can the mediums then find valid answers for your questions?! Clearly, the procedure is dumb, is faulty....

That, brothers and sisters, answers the question of our first point: *why* the Lord tells His people to go “to the law and to the testimony.” That brings us to our second point:

2. How is this instruction valuable?

I mentioned already that the word translated here as ‘law’ is the Hebrew word *Torah*, a term that describes the five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The man who wrote them, Moses, was the only man of whom the Lord says that He spoke “face to face” so that Moses wrote “clearly and not in riddles” (Numbers 12:8). The point here is that God’s revelation to Israel through Moses was plain, and not open to misunderstanding. All God’s further revelation was based on and built on His revelation through Moses, so much so that if one ignores Moses you cannot understand God’s further revelation. This part of Scripture is *foundational*. That’s the Lord’s point here: His people in Judah and Jerusalem need to go back to the foundations of God’s revelation.

How will going back to the Torah, Moses’ books, commonly known as ‘the Law’, help answer the questions of the day?? Simple: in the Torah, in the books of Moses, the Lord explains *why* the kings of Israel and Syria had besieged Jerusalem, and explains *why* the Assyrians will come to plunder and haul away the spoil. The Law of Moses is so plain about the relation between sin and punishment. Genesis 2:17: if you sin, you die. Deuteronomy 11: “see, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse – the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods...” (vss 26ff). As long as God’s people in Jerusalem continued to live in sin, they could consult whoever they wanted to about what they ought to do next, but none of the advice would make a whit of difference as long as the people did not get themselves right with God; they had to repent of their sins, of their self-willed religion. That repentance would include embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught in the sacrifices of the law, namely, that the Lord would send His son into the world to bear *in their place* the punishment His people deserve. According to the law, that good news is true for all who *believe* what God has said. Hence the command of our text: “To the law!”

The Lord also told His people in our text to turn “to the testimony.” The Hebrew word translated for us as ‘testimony’ comes from a word meaning ‘witness’. When the kinsman in the book of Ruth was not able to redeem Ruth he took his sandal from his foot as a public witness or testimony to his decision not to redeem (cf Ruth 4:7, where the same word is used). That is: his *action* was *legal evidence* of his word to Boaz that he couldn’t redeem this kinswoman. In the same way, God has provided not just His *Word of instruction* in the Law, the Torah, but has added *testimony, evidence* that *witnesses* to the truth of His Word as given through Moses. What that witness is? It’s this: in the course of Israel’s history—and it’s recorded in books as Joshua, Judges and Samuel—the Lord God demonstrates the truth of the connection between faith and obedience on the one hand and God’s gracious blessing on the other *and* the connection between unbelief and disobedience on the other hand and God’s punishment. The point is that Israel’s own history provides plenty of evidence concerning how the Lord works with His people.

What, then, are the people of Jerusalem and Judah to do? Isaiah’s instruction to turn “to the testimony” is a command to dig into Israel’s history as described by the inspired writers of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and the likes, and see how God has kept the promises contained in the law. Does history prove or disprove that God blesses faith and obedience, and that He punishes unbelief and disobedience?? If history testifies to the link, what does that mean for the people of Jerusalem in their

circumstances? "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," a modern historian once said (George Santayana). So: the people of Jerusalem are to study their history as recorded in their growing Bibles and learn from it that God keeps His Word as revealed in the Law, the Torah – and therefore recognize that the attack of their enemies is their own fault; they need to return to the faithful service of the Lord God. Then and only then –for God does not change– can they expect the blessing of the Lord, as He has promised. As the prophet says in the second part of vs 20: "If they do not speak according to this word" –and that's the Scriptures contained in the Law of Moses and the Testimony of the historical books– "they have no light of dawn." And vs 21: it shall happen in accordance with the curses further mentioned in the Law of Moses, and that is: "Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, they will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness."

Before we move on to our last point, we need to consider what our Lord Jesus Christ did with this instruction. We know the answer: in the questions He faced in carrying out His God-given mandate, Jesus did not consult with mediums or spiritists. He did not seek His inspiration from bankers or think-tanks or ?? either. He certainly knew His times and did not live in a bubble, but always He consulted the will of His Father in what He ought to do. The will of God came to Him first and foremost through the Word of God, the Old Testament Scripture, and that's to say through Law, the Torah, and the Testimony as it came through the historical writings and the Prophets. It is true that His obedience to the instruction of God as it came to Him in Scripture drove Him to the cross – and precisely that obedience and trust on His part is our salvation.

Where does this leave us?? That's our last point:

3. So what?

The Lord God has not changed. God's manner of dealing with people is the same in the New Testament dispensation as it was in the Old Testament dispensation, inasmuch as He works with the promises of the covenant – blessings on obedience and curses on disobedience. We read together a number of verses from Romans 1, where that connection is abundantly illustrated.

Each one of us has so many decisions to make in the ebb and flow of daily living. We're part of Canadian and North American society, and so feel the effects of the economic downturn that besets our economy. We hear the discussions about climate change and recognize that whatever government or big business does in reaction to the fear of climate change will touch us. We're part and parcel of a society that worships the body (think of the emphasis around us on health and sport and good looks). Society's official acceptance of homosexuality does not pass us by. We've seen footage of the shooting in Tucson last week. To greater or lesser degree all these circumstances and so many more that characterize our day affect the decisions we make – be it whether to expand our business, have more children, renovate our home, go on an exercise program, etc, etc. As we go about making our decisions, we seek advice and input –deliberately or less so– from all sorts of advisers available in our society – be they bankers or mortgage brokers, doctors or health specialists, parents or friends, and so many others. And there's certainly place for all of that.

But at the end of the day, brothers and sisters, what does it help to consult with people about this subject and that if you do not understand the big picture of why God is dealing with the community as He is? Make no mistake: the economy, the climate, social disintegration, issues of law and order, fish populations and anything else you wish to list, is in the sovereign hands of Almighty God. Why does *He*

give what He gives? How does *He* want mankind to respond to what He gives?? It is *Him first of all* that one needs to consult!

How one does that?? “To the Law and to the Testimony!” God’s answers lie in Scriptures, the Law and the Testimony to that Law as revealed in the later books of the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament. And the thing is: the more we are busy with the big picture as the Lord has revealed it, the more we’ll see that God’s Word casts light on the detailed decisions we need to make day by day. Recall Paul’s word to Timothy: “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16f).

What we have? Isaiah’s instruction in our text was intended to drive the people of Judah and Jerusalem back to Bible study. Not just reading the Bible at the kitchen table and then moving on to the matters of the day, but *study* – with the concrete circumstances of the city (including enemy armies surrounding Jerusalem) in the back of their minds. Isaiah’s instruction drives us to the same mandate: serious Bible *study* in the midst of today’s actual questions. What does the *Lord* say about whether (and when) to have another baby? What does the *Lord* say about how I use my time? What does the *Lord* say about getting further education? What does the *Lord* say about climate change and Canada’s embrace of same-sex marriage and *what implications does His Word on these things have on my thinking and acting??* These and so many more are huge questions that we cannot ignore – and cannot find answers to on our own either. This requires *study*, putting heads together, research and debate.

How that’s to be done? There’s the place for Men’s Society, Women’s Society, Young Peoples’. *There’s* the place for ARPA, for Reformed Bible College, and so many opportunities available to us to immerse ourselves into Scripture in the context of today’s questions. And *there’s* the place for personal study, grappling with the Lord’s Word in the nuts and bolts of daily life. Does it happen?? Sure, it does. Is there room for growth? Yes, there is that too.

Let’s put it this way. Something’s wrong if I spend more time gathering advice from some Business Weekly than I do in delving into the Torah and the Testimony, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Something is wrong is if I know my way around the internet better than I know my way around the Bible.

Do not, do not conclude that this word is for others. The Lord cares so much for *you* that He sends *you* back to the Law and the Testimony. He doesn’t have to show you this mercy. So: how will you respond?