**Isaiah 8:19-9:2** January 26, 2020

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 *Isaiah 8:19When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? 20To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. 21Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. 22Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.*

 *9:1Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan—2The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Whatcha Gonna Do?**

 We *could* have had a theme like, “What are you going to do?” That would be more respectable. But that misses the point. “What are you going to do?” feels like you stand at arm’s length from your problem. You pick it up, turn it around, examining each side, all the corners and sharp edges. You think about what size box this problem will fit in—or maybe wrap it in bubble wrap, or maybe you need to find a hammer and smash this problem to pieces. You take time to figure this problem out.

 “Whatcha gonna do?” is very different from “What are you going to do?” “What are you going to do?” is the brain’s response to a problem. “Whatcha gonna do?” is the heart’s. It is instinctive, spur of the moment, Now!

 “Whatcha gonna do?” is what goes through the mind of a recovering addict when he finds himself in a no-win situation. He has kept clean. He has done the work, but it isn’t working. And so he is tempted, really really tempted, to revert to that self-destructive refuge from problems. “Whatcha Gonna Do?”

 We see it in people we know. They get into tough times, and they revert to bad behaviors from their past, often the bad behaviors their parents modeled through the childhood years. When things get bad, human beings revert to what they know. They reason, “It may not have been the best answer, but it helped me survived this long. Why not now?”

 That’s why we need to be most careful when we least want to be careful. When the pile of bills has grown so tall that it schlumps sideways on the kitchen table … when we make such a big mistake we can never live it down… when the enemies circle and laugh… when the sorrow is so profound we don’t want to wake up… Those are the times when we are tempted to take quick ways out—different quick ways out for different people, to be sure—but the quick way, because above all, I want out.

 That’s when you hear the voice in your head not saying, “What are you going to do?” but

**“Whatcha Gonna Do?”**

**I. The Place You Need to Turn to**

 That’s the question the Israelites felt in our reading. Their self-destructive but quick way to relief, is the first words of our reading: ***“When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists…”*** Why would they do that? Why would these Israelites consult mediums and spiritists?

 At this moment in time the southern kingdom of Israel, which was called Judah, was under attack. This southern half of Israel, called Judah, was ruled by a king named Ahaz. Ahaz seems to have been a capable king, but he was an ungodly king. He and his subjects faced a problem. Their blood brothers, the northern kingdom of Israel, had teamed up with another kingdom to the north, Aram. Together, this alliance attacked Ahaz and Judah—which is where the prophet Isaiah was. They attacked Judah and overran much of it. With the land carpeted with enemy soldiers, in a time of hopeless distress, many people of Judah heard that question in their heads: “Whatcha gonna do?” And they reverted to one of the spiritual bad habits of the time.

 Now God had told Ahaz and Judah to trust him. He had given a special sign to show them that he was going to deliver Ahaz and Judah in a miraculous way. But the facts on the ground seemed to contradict the Lord’s promise. So Ahaz and his people started looking for answers in other places. Mediums and spiritists, people who claimed to talk to the spirits of the departed, promised answers today. They didn’t require you to play the waiting game like God did.

 Problem is, turning to spirit guidance is open idolatry. It involves putting faith in something other than God. In our era when Wicca and psychics and mediums multiply, when people think ouija boards are toys, when numerous TV series are based on the paranormal and supernatural, we must remember what God thinks about all these things: *“Let no one be found among you… who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord.”* (Dt 18:10-12) Detestable! That’s powerful. God doesn’t say it often: Detestable. Go ahead. Talk to the spirits, visit the psychic—and know what God thinks about you!

 Now if you ever meet people who do these things, they will confront you with pragmatism. People who put stock in these sorts of things say, “But it works.” As if bank robbers getting away with a truck load of cash makes armed robbery respectable! Results do not determine if something is right. We forget that. As an example: Somebody visited a local psychic and then posted a review, “From her timing of future events and current situations shes [sic] mentioned, [she] has been on point!” (Actual Yelp review.) People read that and they think, “Well, if she gets it right, then I want to know too. I want to have the inside track.” God does not dispute that spiritists, mediums, psychics, maybe even palm readers might sometimes get things right. That’s not the point! Notice that God does not talk about whether or not these things work. In fact, God grants that they sometimes do. Read it in Deuteronomy 13:1-5. But even if they get things right, God says, “Don’t do it! I detest it when you do that! And by doing it, you become detestable to me.”

 But when the chips are down, when life is on the line, “Whatcha gonna do?” When the solution works for everyone else, “Why not?”

 For many people in Judah, and some people in our day, their go-to in times of trouble is the spiritists or other religions. But there are lots of other go-to’s in times of trouble. For some it is the bottle. Others bury their woes in pleasure. For others it is the slot machine. Even virtues can become idols. Some think hard work the solution to all life’s problems: “Have trouble? Get to work!” All are idolatrous substitutes for God in our trouble.

 So when war wages around you, when the waters come up to your neck, whatcha gonna do? Where are you going to turn? Here is Isaiah’s guidance for Israel, for King Ahaz, for you: ***“To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.”***

 ***“To the law and to the testimony!”*** Let that ring in your ears. ***“To God’s Word.”*** The answer to every problem must always be in agreement with God’s revealed word. Anytime somebody says to you—and I mean any time somebody says to you, “Well, I think you should…,” you need to do a mental check. Anytime someone directs you to help, to a solution, you need to remember these words from Isaiah, ***“To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.”*** Dr. Phil might have some practical sounding advice. Oprah too. Others will share their life hack for your problem. Whether it works or not is *not* the question. Here’s the question you need to ask: Does it agree with God’s word?

**II. Why “the Law and Testimony” Is the Right Place to Turn**

 Of course, the sinful human nature doesn’t like God’s Word. It wants the cheap way. It wants the fun way. The last thing our human nature wants is to conform to God’s way. That would require sacrifice, self-control, restraint, submission to God, admission of wrong, patience.

 Don’t let your sinful nature discourage you. Going to God’s word is a profoundly positive thing. This is the place God—just think of that!—here [pointing at Bible] the infinite God of heaven has chosen to reveal his truth to us. Don’t go to silly psychics who ***“whisper and mutter,”*** who have to put on a fake voice to sound authoritative. God has condescended to speak in plain human language so that we might know him. This is the place where we can go and be 100% certain that we will get a truthful and God-pleasing answer. God’s word is God speaking to us. It does not make a mistake.

 What a privilege God’s people have to hold God’s revelation in their hands, free of charge! What a privilege to get clear answers and guidance rather than an astrological chart’s word salad that can be interpreted a hundred different ways. What a privilege to have a consistent objective message that is handed down from generation to generation of believers led by the Holy Spirit.

 But God’s Word is more than the right answer for times of trouble.

 Isaiah knew, or at least God speaking through Isaiah knew even if Isaiah didn’t, that Ahaz was going to refuse to follow God’s guidance. You can read about that all in the Bible books of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles and Isaiah. For their rejection of God, the Israelites would be rejected by God. Judah, Ahaz’s kingdom, would be brought to its knees by Assyria. And Israel, the northern kingdom (which is what the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, etc. referred to), that northern kingdom would be obliterated by Assyria. It would become a land of spiritual darkness for seven centuries.

 Chapter 9, verses one and two, look forward with a prophetic eye. ***“In the past [the Lord] humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”***

 After 750 years God’s prophecy through Isaiah would come to fruition. The humbled lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles along the Jordan River would see a great light. Jesus of Nazareth would walk those lands. Even to people who’d rejected him, God would again extend mercy.

 This isn’t just a prophecy which says, “See, God is right!” It is a prophecy which says, “See, God is gracious. And his forgiving grace is centered in Jesus.”

 Our Gospel reading marveled and repeated Isaiah’s words because seven centuries later Jesus appeared and centered his ministry in this area that never figured prominently in any major event of the Old Testament: the area around the Sea of Galilee, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali. To this land far from the Israelite core, in the lands frequently overrun by foreign invaders, here the Christ came and set up shop. Here he taught and preached. Here he healed as testimony to who he was. A great light shown to those walking in darkness. He directed people not to inner voices or spirits but as no human being ever did, can or will be able to do, he directed people to Himself. Himself, God made flesh; Himself whom the Law and the testimony have testified to and found their fulfillment in; Himself, who would live and die to save his people from their sins.

 No spirits, psychics, mediums etc. can offer you things like that. No. Their vision is too near-sighted, their thoughts too self-centered, their origin Satanic. Same with our preferred crutches to deal with trouble. Such things are shiny tinsel compared to the riches God offers in his word.

 In the moment of crises when you ask yourself, “Whatcha gonna do?” remember: ***“To the law and to the testimony!*** Here you will see a great light.***”*** Amen.