

Does it trouble you to see the shift of our culture away from Christianity? That shift away from the Christian faith has happened quite quickly, hasn't it? According to a study done by Pew Research, those who identify as 'nones', people who claim that they don't worship a specific higher power, have nearly doubled in the past twenty years. Those who identify themselves as Christians have dropped by about 20% in that same timeframe. Similar studies have found that the average in-person attendance at churches is approximately half of what it was in the early 2000s. Whereas once, most agreed that Christianity was a net positive for our society. Now, nearly a quarter of Americans identify Christianity as a major source of society's problems.

We have seen those trends in our own community, haven't we? Church attendance here at Trinity has declined substantially over the past few decades. Whereas in the past, the cultural norm was that Sunday morning was reserved for church attendance, now sports leagues and community events increasingly have laid claim to those times.

What sort of feelings does this cultural shift away from the worship of the true God lead you to feel? Do you feel increasingly isolated and alone? Are you afraid for the future of the church or for the future that awaits your children in an increasingly godless world? Do you find yourself more hesitant to speak, knowing that more and more people are indifferent or even hostile to the message of the Gospel?

The prophet Isaiah lived at a time when people were increasingly abandoning their faith in the true God in pursuit of idols. As a prophet of God, Isaiah was no doubt troubled by his people's shift away from the faith. The faith in the true God had been largely abandoned. Worship of the true God had been supplanted by other priorities. Isaiah understands our feelings.

But what is a Christian to do as our world becomes increasingly opposed to the true God? Do we try to band together and go on the attack against the godlessness of our culture? Do we strive for the creation of new laws that might compel our unbelieving neighbors to behave more like Christians? Will that bring about the change that we desire? Do we try to shame others into saying certain 'Christian-sounding things'? Do we try to browbeat the unreligious into saying "Merry Christmas", as if forcing them to say those words might somehow make them more receptive to the Gospel? Does that

sort of response remedy the problem we are seeing? Does attempting to use force or shame to compel people to act more 'outwardly moral' serve to advance the Gospel's hold upon people's hearts? Or does it make God's church look pushy, and obscure the Gospel by making faith appear to be a simple matter of saying 'Christian-sounding' words and honoring Christian traditions? Such a focus on trying to compel people to use certain words and practice certain behaviors obscures the Gospel, doesn't it? In such a view of Christianity, Jesus' salvation ceases to be the central point.

Did you notice how in Jesus' parable, the servants wanted to take the problem of the weeds among the wheat into their own hands? They wanted to go on the attack. Upon seeing the weeds, they immediately go to the farmer and ask, **"Do you want us to go and pull them up?"** They want to wage war on the weeds. But what does the farmer say? Rather than urging his servants to work to exterminate the weeds, he instead asks them to be patient, to allow the weeds and the wheat to grow together until the time of the harvest!

Is it our duty as Christians to try to root out anything that is remotely unchristian? Is it our duty to threaten those who are living in stubborn unbelief? Is it our duty to try to use our government as a cudgel to compel people to behave more like Christians? No.

The panic we feel often reveals that we trust visible power more than God's invisible promises. Like those servants in Jesus' parable, we want immediate results. We want the weeds addressed now. We want our Christian faith publicly honored now. And when God permits the field to remain mixed, we begin to wonder whether he is really ruling it.

But here our God urges us to patiently and faithfully live as wheat in the midst of the weeds. And as we feel outnumbered and alone in a world that is increasingly consumed by wickedness, our God assures us that he remains with us.

Did you see how God assured Isaiah of this truth? Verse six of our text begins by saying, **"This is what the LORD says— Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first, and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."** Here, our God speaks to the fears we feel as we live in an increasingly godless world. He tells us about himself. He begins by identifying himself as Israel's King. Why is that significant?

The kings of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel at Isaiah's time were a mixed bag. While some kings, like Jotham and Hezekiah, served as godly role models for God's chosen people. Others, like Ahaz and Hosea, were profoundly corrupt and wicked and actively promoted the worship of false gods. Their leadership contributed to the overall spiritual decline of the Israelite people. But here, God encourages the prophet Isaiah to see who is really in control. While those kings sat on thrones and claimed authority over the people of God, the LORD was the true king. His rule over the world could not be overcome by wicked earthly leaders. His control over the world was absolute, which is why he also refers to himself as "**the LORD Almighty**". He alone can claim the title of "**God**". He alone was governing the world at the beginning. He alone would rule it until the end.

Think about how that applies to us today? As our culture and our leaders become increasingly godless, isn't it a comfort to know that our God remains in control? His rule over the world has not changed. His presence has not left us. His supremacy as the only God remains true now, even as an increasingly large percentage of our culture refuses to acknowledge him. There is nothing that the unbelieving world can do that can change these facts. No amount of decline in attendance at worship services changes the fact that the God of Israel remains the true and only God. His identity is not tied to his popularity or to the changes in our culture. He is what he has always been and will forever be. Our true God and King. But he is so much more than that!

Did you notice that the LORD also refers to himself as "**Israel's Redeemer**"? What does this teach us about our God? In the Old Testament, that title, '**Redeemer**,' was used to describe a close family member who would step in to rescue, restore, or reclaim what had been lost. In the book of Ruth, Boaz serves as such a redeemer, preserving the family's inheritance and line of Ruth's deceased husband, Mahlon.

So why does God refer to himself as Israel's "**Redeemer**"? There is no question that the nations of Judah and Israel were spiritually broken. Their love for other gods threatened to destroy their relationship with the true God forever. But here, we see that God had not given up on them. God emphasizes his intent to redeem his people, to restore their place in God's spiritual family.

How would he do that? He doesn't redeem his people and claim them as his own with military force or righteous fury. He redeemed them by coming to earth. He redeemed them by sending his Son, Jesus, to live as their substitute. Jesus lived the godly life they had failed to live. Jesus died the death that they deserved to die. Jesus suffered the rejection of his Heavenly Father, which the Israelite people rightfully deserved.

This is our God's promise to us! He has come to redeem the broken! Notice how he is described as the Redeemer of all of Israel. This doesn't suggest that he was only the Redeemer of the godly. That's important because none of us has lived out our faith in God perfectly. We all have sinned. And here we see God's solution to that sin. Isaiah shows us God's way of fixing our relationship with him. He doesn't suggest that such a solution is found in 'saying the right words' or in 'doing the right things'. Instead, he suggests that the solution to this world's sin and godlessness is found in the salvation promises of Jesus.

What does that mean for us as we live as wheat in God's harvest fields? The change we hope to see in our increasingly godless world isn't something that we can create by force. We are not this world's Redeemer. This world has one Redeemer, and that Redeemer is Jesus! He, and he alone, is the one who can restore the broken and the godless. Rather than respond to this world's increasing godlessness with attempts to shame or compel others into acting in outwardly godly ways, the task entrusted to us by God is to simply point to the limitless love and forgiveness of Christ. Only Jesus and the redemption he brings can effect real change.

This does not mean that we will withdraw from public life or cease seeking justice for our neighbors. We can continue to vote, speak, serve, and advocate. But we do not imagine that we can regenerate hearts through political power or shame. The work of changing hearts is something we entrust to the Gospel alone.

Living as wheat doesn't mean becoming silent, passive, or indifferent. As wheat we grow. As wheat we bear fruit. Christians continue to speak God's truth. We continue to teach the faith to our children. We continue to confess Christ publicly, not with the goal of causing others to feel shame, but to share the hope that is ours in the one who redeems us and rules over us. We do all of these things with the Word of God, not with coercion. We can act with

patience, not panic. We can respond to those caught in unbelief with the type of love shown to us by our Redeemer, while repenting of our own feelings of contempt or hatred for the lost.

Living as wheat in a field of weeds requires trust on our part. We trust that our God is capable of doing what is best for his wheat, even as the weeds grow up alongside us. His patience is not indifference. God is not blind to our suffering as the weeds fill our world. He assures us that those who persist in their unbelief will one day face a reckoning. Isaiah writes, **“People who do that will be put to shame...let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and shame.”** The day of the Lord’s judgment will come. In Jesus’ parable, the farmer eventually calls for his servants to separate the wheat from the weeds. He tells them, **“Collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”**

How can we be certain that this will happen? Isaiah writes, **“Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come— yes, let them foretell what will come. Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?”** Here, Isaiah urges us to look back at all of the promises our God has made in the past. Time after time, we see our God act exactly as he had promised to act. Never do we see a promise of God fail! His words are rock solid! His knowledge of the future is demonstrated throughout the Scriptures to be perfect and dependable! When our God speaks of the coming harvest, that day will indeed come just as he says. At the perfect moment.

On that day, the God who is our Redeemer and King will gather us safely into his eternal storehouse. There, all the brokenness of this world will be gone. There, no enemy will threaten us, no false god will entice us, and no unbelieving world will cause us to fear. We will live forever under the gracious rule of the King who redeemed us with his own blood.

But until that day, what are we to do? We live as wheat among the weeds. That does not mean that we remain silent or inactive. We will continue to confess Christ. We will continue to teach his Word to our children. We will continue to love our neighbors, pray for those who oppose us, speak the truth with gentleness, and hold out the forgiveness Jesus won for sinners. We will not act out of panic, because we know that our King still reigns. We will not rely on

force, because the Gospel, not earthly power, is God's power to save. We will not lose hope, because our Redeemer is still at work.

Perhaps Christianity will continue to lose influence in our culture. Perhaps the world in which our children grow up will be less friendly to the faith than the world we once knew. But the future of Christ's church does not rest on cultural approval, political power, or numerical strength. It rests on the promise of the One who says, **"I am the first, and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."**

So do not tremble. Do not be afraid. The field still belongs to the Lord. The harvest will come at exactly the time he has appointed. Until then, live faithfully where he has planted you. Bear the fruit of faith. Speak of your Redeemer's love. Show love to the people around you. And trust that the King who gave his life to redeem you will not fail to gather you safely home. Amen.