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## PODCAST START:

[intro music]

Fr. Shay: Welcome to the Reading Queerly queer theology podcast, where each week, your hosts Brian Murphy and Shay Kearns will offer a reflection on the week's lectionary readings. Today, Brian and I are looking at the lectionary text for August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013. We're going to take a look at the Isaiah 1:10-20 passage. [verses corrected]

[not read aloud]

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of

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the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. [NRSV]

So Brian, I know that you really love this text, so I'm going to let you talk about it first.

Brian: Since the very first podcast, I've been just waiting for the right passage from Isaiah to come up to talk about. This is the pinnacle of my podcast experience right now. [Shay laughs] I just love Isaiah. Specifically, this is one of a few different passages in the prophets that I love, because it's just such a clear call for justice that I feel like both the conservative and the liberal churches have lost. In many conservative churches, it's about personal piety and this personal relationship with Jesus that also manifests itself in this very heartless, cold, economically-conservative, war hawk-y sort of politics. And in many liberal churches, it comes out as this sort of, 'when life hands you lemons, make lemonade!' and 'the power of positive thinking, yay!' This is sort of no to either of those, right, and in very vivid language. "Stop bringing me meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable. I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. They become a burden to me. Your hands are full of blood." [laughs] "Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong; learn to do right. Seek justice, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." [NIV]

I just think... man, if everyone in every church defended the oppressed and took up the cause of the fatherless and plead the case of the widow, like, what a different world we would live in. I think it's an important reminder that faith and action go together. It's not just enough to believe the right things – God demands action as well.

I found this passage for the first time in my first year in New York City. I was attending Marble Collegiate Church and I was fasting for Lent, which I had never done before. The reverend **David Wilke** [?] was like, everyone should fast, and only have one meal on Monday through Saturday for Lent! And I was like, okay. [laughs] And apparently I was the only one who actually did it, so I was a little annoyed at everyone else for not listening to **David Wilke**. But so, it reminds me of this passage elsewhere in Isaiah which says, "Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke [and] setting free the mistreated...?" [Isaiah 58:6, NIV] I just love this idea that our faith compels us to action. And not only that, but if we don't act, if we sit idly by, that that is a *bad* thing. It's not just that you have to not do evil, but you have to actively do good

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and actively resist the system. When people stand on the sidelines and don't want to take a stand, and don't want to say whether it's a sin or not a sin to be gay, or who want to focus on this issue and not that issue – that's a cop-out. That's not justice. Here in Isaiah we hear God saying, "Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make them clean!" I just appreciate this passage a lot.

FS: I like the idea in this passage, too, that having a worship service or a worship experience is no excuse for not doing justice. I don't think God is saying here to not have worship services, but that if you're not also doing justice, not only are your worship services meaningless but they're actually harmful. I think that that is a wakeup call! [laughs] For me, as someone who is starting a new church, but also I think for preachers in general. Think about, what are you doing? What is your community doing, as far as justice goes? And to be really serious and to be really intentional about that.

The other thing that I think is really interesting, to put a queer spin on this, is that both in verse 9 – "If the Lord of heavenly forces had not spared a few of us, we would be like Sodom; we would resemble Gomorrah." [CEB] – and in verse 10 – "Hear the Lord's word, you leaders of Sodom. Listen to our God's teaching, people of Gomorrah!" [CEB] – and this idea that *this* is the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. [laughs]

B: Right, yeah.

FS: It's not at all about gay people. You know, so often in the evangelical church – this is one of the things I don't understand – in the evangelical church, we were taught that if you have a question about something the Bible says and what it means, then you look other places in the Bible to get your answer. Which, granted, maybe not a helpful linguistic tool in general. However, if that's what they're teaching...

B: Right, internal... [both laugh]

FS: Right. Then right here is their answer as to what the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is. And so the fact that they're making it about gay people is not only an incorrect translation of the original text, but it's dishonest in their own translation and the way that they're supposed to read scripture in general. Which I find rather interesting.

B: [laughs] Yeah. You and me both. Also, at the end, I'm drawn to the end as well. I often hear people say, oh, he's a good person, or she's a good person. Or,

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I try to be a good person. Or that person's mean, so that's an evil person. I find this distinction between 'good' people and 'bad' people sort of unhelpful. And even homophobic or not homophobic, racist or not racist, transphobic or not transphobic – sometimes you *do* mean things or bad things. And you *do* good things or bad things. Or you say or do something that's racist or sexist or homophobic or transphobic. Or you say something that's empowering and positive. The end, I really appreciate, because it says, "Come now, let us settle the matter... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land." [NIV]

If you wash yourself clean and you stop doing wrong and you seek justice, you can be transformed also. Whether that means you're actively an oppressor, you can be transformed, or if you're just one of those people who's sitting on the sidelines – I don't want to make this into an us-vs-them. If you're sitting on the sidelines or you haven't yet taken a public stand on whether it's okay to be gay or trans, or what that means for queer inclusion in the church – I'm not writing you off or damning you. The way forward is very simple. Just start seeking justice, and you can become redeemed as well.

FS: And in that, it's really about action. It's about actively working for justice. I think 'seeking justice' is almost too easy. It's actually working for justice.

B: And defending the oppressed, right?

FS: And defending the oppressed. It's more than just *saying*, oh, I'm okay with gay people.

B: Sure.

FS: It's actually working for that.

B: And how does defending the oppressed and taking up the cause of the fatherless, how does that transform your whole life and all of your decisions and your worldview? I think that's important also. That is where transformation and redemption and salvation comes from.

FS: Absolutely.

[outro music]

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B: This has been Reading Queerly, the queer lectionary podcast. I'm Brian—

FS: And I'm Shay. And you can find out more at [QueerTheology.com](http://QueerTheology.com).

B: If you'd like to connect with us, send us an email to [connect@queertheology.com](mailto:connect@queertheology.com).

FS: Thanks for listening.

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Transcript by Taylor Walker