Advent Devotional November 30, 2026

Scripture

Isaiah 1:10-20

10 Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
11 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.

12 When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more!
13 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.
14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
15 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.
16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove your evil deeds
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil;
17 learn to do good;
seek justice;
rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan;
plead for the widow.

18 Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
If your sins are like scarlet,
will they become like snow?
If they are red like crimson,
will they become like wool?
19 If you are willing and obedient,

you shall eat the good of the land,
20 *but if you refuse and rebel,*
you shall be devoured by the sword,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Devotion

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In the Evangelical circles in which I came to faith, Isaiah 1:18 played a crucial role, in preaching and hymnody: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (KJV). Only *believe*, and Jesus will forgive your sins, making your heart clean and your record clear: "as white as snow."

However, if you read this passage in the NRSVue, you will be in for a shock:

Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
If your sins are like scarlet,
will they become like snow?
If they are red like crimson,
will they become like wool?

Phrased as questions, these sentences read not as reassurance, but as an accusation: how *dare* you think that your blatant transgressions, indelible as scarlet dye, are not apparent to the Lord?

To be fair, most English translations (for example, the NIV, the CEB, and even the Jewish Publication Society's *Tanakh*) render this passage as the KJV does, treating these not as questions, but as simple statements. The Hebrew is no help to us: usually, questions are explicitly marked as such, but not always. Often, we need to rely on the context to tell whether a sentence is intended to be a statement or a question. In the accusatory context of this first chapter of Isaiah (which after all refers to Jerusalem and Judah as Sodom and Gomorrah [Isa 1:10]!), a statement of radical forgiveness does seem jarring—although supporters of that reading might argue, perhaps that is exactly the point.

Still, I must confess that I believe the NRSVue has it right. The problem with the faith of my youth was that it was entirely too *spiritual*—as, indeed, is much American Christianity today! We have made faith an entirely interior, private affair, just between me and Jesus—ignoring the clear demands of Scripture that our lives be holy, responsive, and obedient to the Lord's righteousness (see Isa 1:19-20). But as C. S. Lewis wrote in his classic *Mere Christianity*, new life in Christ "is not merely the spreading of an idea … There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God"!

Prayer

Holy Lord: In this season of Advent, as we anticipate Your incarnation, may we be willing ourselves to become, like Mary, God-bearers. Make us by Your Spirit into faithful witnesses to the truth of the gospel by our transformed lives. In Your own holy Name we pray, amen.