*From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says: “Save me! You are my god!” They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say: “Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?” Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say: “Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?” Hear, everyone who thirsts; come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your earnings for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Now you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for He has glorified you.*  Isaiah 44:17-20; 55:1-5

*When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed Him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to Him and said: “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.” Jesus replied: “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered. “Bring them here to me,” He said. And He directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.* Matthew 14:13-21

*A colonel in the Army was in his office. A private knocked on his door. Wanting to impress the private, the colonel picked up the phone and started talking while waving this private into his office. The colonel stated, “yes Mr. President. I will get on this right away. You have the right man for the job. Thank you for thinking of me. By the way, give my best to the first lady” and hung up the phone.*

*The colonel then turned to the private in harsh tone: “What do you want!”*

*The private said: “Nothing sir. I am just here to fix the phone.”*

The Donut Hole.

1. I heard many sermons on feeding the crowd of five thousand and although this is what our Gospel reading is about today, I would prefer to focus instead on another story, the words of God spoken to Isaiah: *“Hear, everyone who thirsts; come to the waters.”* For me the words of God to Isaiah carry the same message as Jesus’ miracle of five loafs and two fish. What God offers is always the abundance, no matter what it is. There is a moment in Charles Dickens’ *“Christmas Carol”* when the spirit of the Christmas Present introduces to Scrooge two children, hiding beneath his robe. The spirit names them *“Ignorance”* and *“Want.”* Both of these beings represent the dark sides of human soul and both of them are still very much alive and well in the society, remaining the major driving force behind many human actions.

2. In preceding chapters (44:20) of his prophecy, Isaiah speaks of a man whose actions are motivated by the dark sides of his existence and he points out that such motivation leads to nothing else but destruction. He writes: *“He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?”* (Isaiah 44:20) Isaiah’s words, just as Dickens’ names of the two children have a very powerful and special meaning in modern society, because today’s world experiences something that the world of Isaiah’ or even Dickens’ days did not. Our western civilization is more affluent today that any other civilization in the history of the humanity. Yet, even in the midst of the prosperity of the modern age we are emptier, and shallower than people before us. The society tries to find cure in drugs, immorality, sex, and alcohol, only to discover that all these leads them to a total destruction. Modern world seems to indeed be feeding on ashes, ashes of destruction exactly because humanity’s *“Ignorance”* and *“Want.”*

3. A few years ago I came across an article in one of the issues of “The National Geographic,” and since then I also saw a documentary based on the findings of this article. Apparently, until quite recently, the scientists believed that the *“Homo Sapiens”* species of who we, the modern humans are, were the evolutionary descendants of the *“Neanderthal.”* Today scientists believe however that both of these species coexisted for thousands of years and DNA analysis find the *“neandertal”* genes in our DNA sequence. The *“scientific knowledge*” of old lost its credibility, yet many people still believe that science and only science has all the answers and the cures for the problems of the humanity. Nothing can be further from the truth. Notwithstanding the fact that I am a Christian and your pastor, I also am a philosopher and as such I also attest that *“the view of life that does not include God presents a tragic distortion.”* When our society tries to undermine God and His presence it robs itself of the very humanity that distinguishes us from other species of life on earth.

4. When people try to nourish themselves with their own views and philosophies, however beautiful and superficially sound, they will eventually discover that these lead to the brink of a disaster. The history proved this time and time again. Unfortunately, as one of the comedians quipped, quoting Hegel: *“The history teaches us that it has never taught us anything.”* I am afraid that he was indeed very right. So, as Isaiah concludes: man’s *“ignorant heart misleads him.”* Nothing can substitute God in the human heart, not a philosophy, not a science, not a man-made morality or ideology. When Isaiah said: *“...save me, for you are my God...”*he mocked, clearly indicating that the *“man-made”* idols have no power and cannot change or fill the emptiness of the human’s heart. Only God can fill such emptiness and change human heart.

5. In many years of my ministry I had many occasions to witness death. Many times, I was called in the middle of the night to come to the hospital and to comfort the grieving family or a dying patient. I have witnessed many types of deaths and I the ways people handle death. I have never witnessed a moment though, when the death would be accepted a natural part of existence by an atheist or his family. The emptiness of their heart sounded as a gigantic empty drum and the mere tragedy was always clearly written on their faces. When people try to supplement God with their own ideas, when the end-of-life approaches, they see these ideas crumbling as the house of cards or the one made of straw. The ignorant man, the man whose heart is empty and without hope in this last moment of his life realizes that *“...he cannot save himself...”*In contrast, those who committed themselves to God almost anxiously wait for the moment when they will meet their Savior. There is no tragedy in the believer's death. There is obviously the pain of loss, a physical connection, for those who remain, but there is hope and assurance, so there is peace.

6. How do we face daily trials and struggles of life is also shaped by what we believe and who do we trust. David was not afraid of Goliath because he knew that he is in God’s hands. Joshua was not afraid to enter the Promised Land and fight because he knew that God is with him. Even Jesus himself acknowledged the importance of God’s presence when He cried to the Father: *“Why have You forsaken me?”*Mark 15:34

Isaiah is right on target when he puts the question into the mouth of a man who does not trust the Lord, saying:*“...is not this thing in my right hand a lie?”* Many people realize that life without Jesus is empty and meaningless. When my older son was a young child, I had a video with the songs by “The Donut Man,” and one of the songs there says: *“Life without Jesus is like a donut, there’s a hole in the middle of your heart.”*

7. Without God human lives are empty, unfulfilled and sooner or later people will try to find a substitute for God, but nothing really works in the long run. People may find a temporary relief, but it is like infatuation rather than true love. When He is ignored, people try to fill the emptiness of their heart with many things. Nothing however works. Fame, money, may give a temporary satisfaction, and yet how many of the rich and famous are addicted to drugs or alcohol, how many of them even die, whether because of the overdose or by their own hand in suicide. No man -made idol may replace God, nothing and nobody can replace Jesus in a human heart.

8. In the end, everyone must make decisions in life as what this life will be. We all must respond to Jesus like Thomas did when he said: *“My Lord and my God!”* or like Joshua who said: *“...as for me and my house we will serve the Lord...”*or listen to the devil who told Adam and Eve to disobey God and become like God themselves. As the species, we still live with the consequences of their decision and our human nature remains as rebellious as ever. Fortunately, those of us who responded to Christ, those who plugged the hole of our heart with the presence of our Savior, we may look on life with a positive outlook, with hope and certainty. Even in the darkest moments of our lives, and we do experience them, God is still there with us and carries us through just as He carried David through the *“valley of shadow of death.”* There are still people around us who are empty and broken even if they do not want to admit. We have what they need and we may show them that God indeed loves them and He may fill the emptiness of their heart and give them the everlasting peace. We too, just as the disciples who were able to feed the crowd when Jesus blessed the bread and blessed the fish, may feed the lost, the lonely, the disenchanted, and desperate for help.