

REBUILDING AND RETURNING

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Thursday, August 22, 2019

Scripture: [Isaiah 58:9–14](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Today we're going to read from the book of the Prophet Isaiah. Inside this book, actually, scholars generally have agreed on at least two if not three periods of writing. This last one, sometimes called "Trito-Isaiah" (3rd Isaiah, essentially) actually speaks to a time *after* the return of Israel from exile in Babylon. The community has gathered back in Jerusalem, and there is work underway to rebuild the temple which is at the center of their worship life, and will remain there until a little after Jesus's death.

In the way of construction, some things are not going as planned or scheduled. People are in conflict, old ways of injustice are still rampant. So listen to Isaiah as he asks the people to look at the structures and foundations of their common life as a way to build up the worship and connection of the people to God.

SERMON

How do you rebuild a whole community, a whole nation, a whole way of life? That's the huge question that the people of Israel are wrestling with as Isaiah addresses them.

Last week we talked about transitions as heading off into a new direction in life. Maybe only slightly by accident, today I want to talk about those times we are called to head off... back to where we belong. This is, I think, not a thing that our common culture and history in America often excels... this is where you get that old "There are no second acts in American lives..." thing. Thanks be to God, the Bible tells the story of God continuing to write a story for us... no matter how many Acts it takes.

Have you ever faced rebuilding? I mean, not in a little way... Remember the "[Earthquake of 2011](#)" here? I mean really... when I first arrived at Foreside last year we were deep in the wildfire season in California... I often found myself thinking of those folks who had lost their homes, memories, who had to start again, through no fault of their own... who sometimes maybe disproportionately bore the burden of some of our changing climate.

That is not this: rather than a natural disaster, what Isaiah speaks to is a kind of cultural and moral wildfire in his time: *after* the loss, *after* the exile. But these themes will be familiar to us... Isaiah lifts up ethical concerns that lives in many of our world religion: obligations to others in connection to obligations to God, and even the debate of right intention vs. right action.

It's clear from today's passage that there are some elements of Jewish religious practice that are underway currently among the people: at the very least there is some awareness of the Sabbath, even if it apparently not very respected. Additionally, with the focus on food in the early part of the scripture, we might assume that there are some basics rituals of feast and fast that are being observed.

But the prophet points to how hollow these things can become as routine and not as spiritual practice. Those who *have* are observing fast days appropriately, but it is made hollow by the fact that there are so many who are hungry every day. Many say they want God's forgiveness, but spend much of their time ascribing blame to their neighbor. People observe the sabbath day, but not to renew their faith, and there's a hint that in fact some folks have found a way to turn a profit even on a day with no work.

In short, this section from Isaiah is telling the people that one of the reasons they are so unsure where God is... is because they have been looking so far away.

They need to return... return to remembering the why of all their worship and working, return to practicing not just the functions of a people who worship God, but of creating a community which shows God: in its justice, in its compassion, in its love.

There is of course a word for this: repentance.

One of the things that makes being Christian so hard is that it is a deep—and wide—faith. We are such a large tradition that the same words can mean drastically different things... sometimes, words that were meant to be a helpful way of caring and encouraging people go astray and become deeply hurtful.

In the Christian “word cloud” right now repentance is often distrusted because of its proximity to a word that has definitely gone haywire a few times: sin. Sin is a word for a whole other day, but for lots of reasons I need you to know that I don't think we should toss it out... its got some good uses, if it's a tool and not a weapon... which of course is how it's been used too often.

But it's core to this scripture, and its core to us... who follow one who over and over again has his ministry defined as one of repentance and forgiveness. John the Baptist opens it up for Jesus, and then the disciples carry it on. ^[1] The life and ministry of Jesus call to us to do what the word actually means: “turn around.” Another way might be to say “reorient” one's life. One of the things I need the most reminding of in life is that transformation, that repentance... by which I mean a real “turning around,” one that makes a difference in my life, and in life around me... is possible.

Because failure is part of the human gig, but that can't be the last word. There *must be* another act to our lives. And that is the good news that the prophet brings to Israel.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

It's a reminding them that it is easy to build when the foundation of your life is God's love and justice.

One of the ways in which I know we struggle to turn around is as a collective community. Things which seem to large for us to wrestle with. Which require too much political capital... we see far too many examples of how hard it is to re-orient our country and our communities towards even slight improvements... but we cannot lose hope... We cannot let our foundation become one of inaction and acceptance... we cannot let our own failures or loss or shame become our final act.

This is why Dr. King said, "The time is always right to do right." He was literally speaking about our inclination to let political paralysis kill our hope, our chance to turn... even a little bit... towards hope; towards God.

We live in times in which we are confronted by the harsh realities of where our society falls short. *Which is a good thing.* You cannot address what you cannot name. Just recently, I was kind of amazed to see that the Business Roundtable, this big board of CEO's, just redefined what the purpose of a corporation is. For a certain number of years, the purpose of a corporation in our society was simply to maximize profit for shareholders. This week, a group of businesses actually said out loud: that's not enough... we *can* change. They said that a corporation bears a public trust for customers and employees and communities... the common good.

This week, many are recognizing a sad anniversary in this nation. As near as we can figure, in August of 1619, the first people of African descent were brought to North America in slavery.

Too often, this original sin of our country has been a fact of our existence that we have tried to sweep away, or have been afraid to examine thoroughly... that we might actually *repent*, that we might actually *turn around* and reorient ourselves in line with justice. I'm not going to go all the way there today, there's a scripture coming up that I want us to look at with this story, but if you want to get familiar... I would point you towards *The 1619 Project*^[2] which appeared in the New York Times Magazine last week. You need to read this.

So be not afraid. The incredible good news of God, promised through the prophets, delivered in the life of Jesus is this: when our lives crumble, as one or as many, God is there. And if we can ground ourselves in God's presence and God's love... we can rebuild, and build a community more welcoming, more just, and more infused with the presence of God... restorer of our streets to live in.

Amen.

1. Luke 24:47 ↩

2. The New York Times Magazine, August 14, 2019. [Online](#). ↩