

“Speaking To My Fear Filled Heart”

Isaiah 35:1-10

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Deserts bloom, maladies being healed, and highways available to traverse the wilderness – such are the metaphors of the Prophet Isaiah. As a commuter, highways play a huge role in my life. And I will admit that as I travel I do talk to God and about God regarding their condition and even comment regarding those other commuters who are accompanying me on the highway as I travel. However, this may not be either the appropriate time or place to include those observations so I will stick to a discussion of our text from Isaiah.

Now as a prophet Isaiah has few equals and as with other prophets in the Biblical witness, Isaiah offers a number of visions of God and God’s promising involvement in the life of the community of faith. This pericope or passage is offered by the lectionary as a traditional Advent passage for preachers to interpret for their congregations. Yet as we stand in the midst of Advent, that season of preparation, many in this community may feel such preparation is obviated by feelings of sadness and the mourning despair of the loss of pastoral leadership. This pericope from Isaiah with its metaphors may, at a time like this, seem abstruse at minimum and ill-chosen at maximum yet I think it offers us a metaphor of hope and joy as well as assurance. Developed sometime in the sixth century before the Common Era, this part of Isaiah has as its audience probably those whose lives had been disrupted by a foreign military force. Taken into exile the people longed to return to a place where their culture could be rebuilt, their lives restarted, and their religious practices reborn. The prophet offered a vision of judgment, redemption, and hope.

We are not a people in exile nor is ours a desert land, though right now we may be feeling both exiled and dry as a desert spiritually especially as a congregation. And some may feel that somehow God’s judgment has reigned down upon us as two gifted and loved ministers have chosen to leave in the last eighteen months. Surely God must be judging us and bringing down upon us such judgment for something. Where is the highway? When will this desert bloom? Where is the redemption? Where is the hope? How can our aching hearts be comforted?

I want to be upfront and honest with you and not play any theological games or offer you a vision in which I don’t believe. My faith in God is not in a God who controls the actions of others or me nor of nature nor of a god of mighty acts. My

faith is much more Tillichian and Whiteheadian, to drop the names of two theological giants. For Tillich, God was the ground of being, our ultimate concern and for Alfred North Whitehead, God didn't control or act but called, lured, enticed people, us to live out lives of justice, peace, and beauty. I find comfort, hope, and joy in such a faith and offer to you a vision based on their ideas as well as utilizing the metaphors of Isaiah's writings. My vision is that as we continue as a worshiping community, a place of community and conversation we consider that God acts as a highway for us to move ahead celebrating our humanity and seeking to live out our faith as a worshiping community.

To return to Isaiah, it may sound overly simplistic but the symbolism offered of a highway through the desert as a sign of salvation is one we ought consider. Remember what a highway is. Highways enable people to move from point A to point B easily, quickly, and with as little effort as possible. Highways provide a foundation upon which we move and for the people of Isaiah's day as well as the early church offered great symbolic worth. Remember that for the early church highways were a symbol of the power of Rome and its ability not simply to conquer but to rule the nations of the Mediterranean. Rome built highways for two reasons. They built them to move the wealth of the conquered nations to Rome but most importantly these highways were built to enable armies to move from place to place and quickly respond to any rebellions. Highways have always been seen as part of a system for any nation to protect itself. We have a national system of interstate highways because Dwight Eisenhower, a retired general, convinced the nation that they needed to be built as part of our defense system. If you really want high speed rail, it needs to be talked about as contributing to the defense of the nation and not providing commuters with a means to go to work. Doing that will assure it being built but I digress.

The symbolic envisioning of God as creator of a highway acknowledges that as we move God remains as the foundation of our lives and, as any highway, also beckons us to keep moving, to continue our journey. And to wear this metaphor out, we are also reminded that even in the dark, when we really can't see what's ahead of us, God like a highway is there and while we need act with courage and with faith, God remains ahead of but also with us. It is the Tillichian ground combined with the Whiteheadian lure or creative enticement. And as a community, we need recognize that it is not one person, one minister, or one group we are here to worship. It is God who calls us here and calls us to move ahead. Mourn, yes. Remember the past, yes. But we can't go back, we can't turn around except like a car on a one way street, we do so and imperil ourselves and others.

God is with us but God also calls us to move to the future and build a worshipping community of joy, hope, justice, and beauty.

So how do we know and celebrate God's presence? Again, I must turn to Dr's Whitehead and Tillich. We celebrate and know God's presence when we are most human. Some may argue and seek to impress upon us a notion of "fallen humanity" and "sinful humanity" but I beg to differ and again I turn to Isaiah and our reading for today. Notice what happens when God appears in Isaiah's vision, the theophany or presence of God promises that the blind will see, the lame will walk, the deaf will hear – people's bodies become whole. And each of these abilities enables us to live in community for they allow us to communicate, to participate and to continue the building of community. I think the symbolism is plain. God's presence calls us to be fully human that we might participate with others in community. And remember in Matthew's gospel the story is told that John the Baptist's disciples come to Jesus and ask if he is the savior, the theophanic embodiment, Matthew offers his answer as quoting this passage from Isaiah! God doesn't call us to another reality, another way of being. God calls us to be fully human. The sign of God's salvation, if you wish to use that term is that we live out our humanness in community with justice, hope, pleasure, and beauty! For us, it is such a community which symbolizes the desert bloom. What is more beautiful or more a sign of God's presence than a community which joins in worship, conversation, and service? In the midst of a world seemingly filled with violence, hatred, and divisions, our faith calls us to celebrate the opportunity to make such a desert bloom with justice, joy, pleasure, and beauty.

Some of you work in the health professions. Your days, and I am sure some nights, are spent seeking to make whole those who come to you or to discover the means for others to make such whole. And the community, the society supports your efforts, celebrates your skills, knowledge, and artistry. Now, I doubt any of us would say that we should replace your efforts with some sort of faith healing activity or refuse to allow your presence here because of your profession but there was a time when such healing arts, such medical science was unknown and people believed that illness, disabilities were a sign of God's displeasure. Therefore they offered the notion that God's presence would be known when such disease or disabilities were healed just as we read in Isaiah or can read in Matthew. We no longer believe that disease or disability is a result of God's judgment so what do we do with such passages as these two in Isaiah and Matthew? I sometime think the reason that mainline liberal protestant denominations are so bad at Biblical studies, that so few in our congregations actually read and study the Bible is because we are confronted by such passages as these and they require

acknowledgement of the historical nature and evolutionary construction of the document. The Bible reflects its writers' historical biases as well as the piece by piece construction of it. We should remember that we must act as interpreters of the Biblical witness. It cannot simply be read and accepted as though it were an eyewitness account of any of its events.

Constructed over many years, each of the books we find in our version of the Bible reflects different historical, scientific, and theological understandings. The evolutionary nature of faith and its historical roots needn't conflict if we are willing to accept that interpretation is one of greatest gifts in which God calls us to participate. The notion of humans made whole by God's presence is, for me, a symbol that God calls us to be fully human and to live as such in order that we reflect that presence. Our humanity is to be celebrated in all its dimensions. We needn't deny our scientific advances as though they would deny our belief in God's presence. Just as we needn't sit and wait for God to build a highway to the future because that's what Isaiah read literally would call us to do, we also needn't deny that being fully human is what God calls us to be. And the symbolism of Isaiah points in that direction so theologically I believe we are safe and faithful to the text to embrace that notion.

We are a congregation in the midst of a journey, a journey of faith which at this time is especially challenging. I want to admonish us not to fall into the easy and fundamentalist trap of seeking to find God's hand or acts in our situation. Rather I believe what we should celebrate is God's presence and participation as God calls us to move ahead with joy, hope, pleasure, and beauty as we seek to live as full human beings in community with others building communities of justice, hope, pleasure, beauty, and peace. AMEN.