

Repairers of the Breach

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ISAIAH 58:1-12

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“Repairers of the Breach” | Isaiah 58:1-12 | Pastor Jess Scholten

Our Scripture passage this morning is from Isaiah, an Old Testament book that starts a section of the Hebrew Scriptures given to us from the major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel. Isaiah chapters 1-39 are reflections of the prophet Isaiah’s ministry to the Hebrew people during 740-700 BCE. Chapters 40-66 are generally understood to be written by other prophets who were part of the Hebrew community in 6th century BCE, chapters 40-55 being a text of consolation during the Babylonian exile where God’s people were forcibly removed from Jerusalem and the Temple was destroyed, and then chapters 55-66 where we find our reading for today, which speaks to the people seeking to rebuild their community post-exile.

A little note about prophets. Prophets are not kings or even sometimes leaders of the people. And they aren’t fortune tellers – they don’t read the stars or sit in front of a crystal ball. Instead, prophets listen for God’s Spirit and pay attention what God’s people are doing, and then they prophesy to what might happen. Our Scripture passage this morning is given to people disoriented by exile but seeking God again – they just aren’t getting it right in how to go about that.

The Almighty did not save them from exile – did not act as a vending machine for the people as they had hoped – and now they’re trying to figure out what’s next. That’s where our passage starts today. (Isaiah 58:1-12)

Annie Dillard, Pulitzer Prize winning author reflected in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, that sometimes in church we should put on crash helmets and the ushers should give out life preservers and seat belts for the pews. I think she might have been thinking about a passage like this. God in Isaiah 58 is abundantly clear about what it is we are supposed to do as God’s people: compassionate justice, love in action. God blasts the people for acting as if personal piety is the call of faith instead of **community action**.

A couple of commentators had strong things to say about this passage. In John Goldingay’s book, *Isaiah for Everyone*, he pointedly titles this passage of Scripture “(Un)spiritual Practices” (221) – contrasting a spiritual practice movement of praying and fasting and silence to the spiritual practices of Martin Luther King Jr, “taking action to ensure people are treated more fairly in our country” (223).

Paul Hanson, in his commentary in the Interpretation series (Isaiah 40-66) titles this section (slide): “Your Own Interests or the Interests of God?” (204). He writes, “The problem is not that the people are unreligious. That would be easy to condemn. No, they are hyper correct in their religious observances and delighted to exhibit their piety, but in their very exercise of religion they miss the essential point, God’s order of compassionate justice” (204). (John Knox Press, 1995).

Get your seatbelts on, my friends. God isn't messing around when the people ask: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Even if the people are saying: "we're doing the right things, O God, but we're not experiencing your blessing," God convicts the people. It's not through fasting while at the same time oppressing your workers – it's not going hungry while creating spaces of hunger in the world – it's not about doing a spiritual practice but then being quarrelsome about it – it's not about bowing your head and then lying in sackcloth and ashes *while others genuinely suffer*.

It is about relieving the suffering of the world.

God says, "Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free.... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house...?... Then," says the Lord, "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly.... Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and [God] will say, Here I am."

"If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.... [Then] you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

God calls the Israelites *and us today* to compassionate care – empathy in action – while creating community and justice. This is how we become repairers of the breach, healers of what is broken, and restorers of the streets. This is how we experience God's transformation in our own lives and in our *own* streets. And maybe even... in our own country.

Compassionate care according to Isaiah 58 involves sharing bread, providing shelter, clothing people, creating community, offering food to the hungry, satisfying the needs of the afflicted.

On the one hand, good job, Covenant. We are seeking to do these things as a congregation – focusing our mission on food insecurity and supporting local food pantries and community centers like our Christmas Eve offering to the Fritz Food Pantry. Almost \$5200 just on Christmas Eve – all for our neighbors.

Today is Heifer Sunday – a festival of sorts here at church complete with farm animal costumes and games of all kinds in Bradfield Hall between worship services to raise money for Heifer Internation. Heifer is an organization through which God is transforming people's lives with help in rural areas of the world with high poverty and food insecurity through providing agricultural support. Today, I want you to meet Chasha and see how her life was changed forever.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSf4IQPrOpA>

I love her exclamations: "Something good is happening here." "That has never happened before." "I never thought it would be like this."

Chasha's life was transformed, and through Heifer's tradition of Passing on the Gift®, giving the animal's first female offspring, or the equivalent value, to another family in need, more and more of Chasha's neighbors' lives were transformed as well. This kind of loving action that gives people dignity and agency is how we become repairers of the breach.

While we're doing a good job seeking to participate in God's good work with our dollars and

today our coins, our call is also to meaningful action and community building. God doesn't let the people off the hook in Isaiah – you can pray and fast on the sabbath, but that's empty when your neighbor is hungry or when your commerce on the other days makes them suffer. You can't cancel your family or people with whom you don't get along.

These connections we form with others are essential to how we can most fully live out our communal call as God's people. The last few weeks, many of us have been trying to figure out meaningful action in light of what our neighbors in Chicago and Minneapolis have been facing. What do we do to prepare ourselves for the potential that this could happen here in Wisconsin or even Madison? Many of us have expressed frustration in a variety of places about not having centralized information. Who is going to give us instruction? Who is going to tell us when to rally?

The faith leaders and the examples from other cities indicate that frankly... it's not like that. It's not about the one big community activity. It's about our local connections and neighborhood networks. It literally comes down to knowing our neighbors and knowing our churches and community assets, so we can assess needs and strengths – the ways we can help each other, better together. It's about connecting with our local schools and having conversations with the leadership about what they need and how we can be helpful. ***The movement is local.***

Cameron Trimble, a UCC pastor turned entrepreneur and coach, is the CEO of Convergence, a non-profit that helps with church and organizational transformation. Her substack this Friday was a reflection on a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh almost three decades old that perhaps the next Buddha will not take an individual form but the form of a Sangha – a community practicing understanding and loving kindness. Not an individual leader, but a collective, a people. Cameron reflected on how too often we look for salvation in singular forms, scanning the horizon for “charismatic leaders, gifted speakers, strategic masterminds – someone who can carry the weight for us.”

But lately our most meaningful movements – like in Minneapolis, at Standing Rock, the Women's March, March for our Lives when students took action with their feet – these movements are community based. I was at a training through the Wisconsin Council of Churches last week, and Hannah Freeman, the Lead Organizer and Executive Director of MICAHA (Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope) said that non-violent civil resistance movements have prevented regimes 52% of the time, and they have overcome dictatorship every single time when they have activated 3.5% of the population, engaging people to be pro-democracy and involved in non-violent, civil resistance.

During Black History Month, we are reminded pointedly of those who have given us a legacy of Civil Rights and non-violent engagement – leaders like Martin Luther King Jr, yes, but also John Lewis, Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, Daisy Bates. People who modeled for us engagement with the community, knowing rights, valuing others. This legacy of leadership seeks to overcome our country's legacy of slavery, racism, and inequality, so that we can find true equality and freedom – for all, not just some. This is the same call God gives to the people in Isaiah 58, to remove the yoke [of oppression] and the speaking [and doing] of evil.

God knows we must assuredly work more valiantly and diligently to overcome racism and evil these days. I'm not clutching my pearls nor wasting my words on acknowledging the most recent atrocity from the White House – this is just another blatant display of racism we know exists. We know the evils of White Supremacy are continuing to be upheld by people in elected

leadership, some circles, and conservative church pastors and congregations claiming Christ but not claiming the values Christ teaches. We cannot be blind to this, and we have work to do.

So what are our next steps for community building and love in action? We have several on the docket right now at Covenant. You heard about it in the announcements – RAF, our Racist Anonymous Fellowship regularly helps walk us through the twelve steps for owning your racism. As the RAF website states, because racism is the foundation of the society we are in, “to simply carry on with absolutely no active interruption of that system is to be complicit with it.” The group would love for you to join them for their upcoming book study: *Racial Justice for the Long-Haul: How White Christian Advocates Persevere (& Why)* by Christine Jeske – come for the book, stay for the transformative fellowship that will help us work to dismantling structural racism. <https://www.rafellowship.com/blank-page>

Our Awaken Dane neighborhood network continues to meet – focusing on getting to know neighbors through meaningful and loving engagement. In April, May, and June, we are excited to launch Awaken Covenant – three congregation-wide lunches with study, learning, and easy action steps for becoming a better neighbor, so we can be more engaged in our neighborhoods. April 19, May 17, June 14 – mark your calendars and stay tuned for more information.

Be engaged in Connect events, so we get to know each other better. Fill out the Serving Survey. Be a penpal or a reading buddy for our partner elementary school, Glenn Stephens. Get to know others and participate in local networks to create connection and safety. Bring your neighbors some cookies, attend a Voces de la Frontera training, write letters to our elected officials – their addresses are still available online on last week’s prayer list. Pray for your neighbors – by name, if possible, and pray for the people on the prayer list. And your enemies. Pray for wisdom for our leaders and that goodness will prevail. Pray for transformation and healing – for restoration.

If all that sounds like too much, make an appointment with a therapist and learn grounding techniques, so that you aren’t in a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn stage and are ready to engage in meaningful action. I’ve been overwhelmed and frozen sometimes, too, but we have to shake that off. Fear-induced reactions are just what people abusing power want us to feel. Instead, we are called to be repairers of the very real breaches in justice, love, and kindness.

The fast God chooses is justice - share your bread with the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted. Be repairers of the breach, so that we too with Chasha can exclaim: “Something good is happening here.” “That has never happened before.” And with joy rather than with grief all can declare: “I never thought it would be like this.” May it be so. Amen.