



SAINT PETER'S CHURCH

Repairers and Rebuilders

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 25, 2019*

Isaiah 58:1-14

“Shout for all you are worth, raise your voice like a trumpet! Proclaim to the people their faults, tell the house of Leah and Rachel and Jacob their sins! They seek me daily, they long to know my ways, like a nation that wants to act with integrity and not ignore the Law of its God. They ask me for laws that are just, they long for God to draw near. Yet they say, ‘Why should we fast if you never see it? Why do penance if you never notice?’ Because when you fast, it’s business as usual, and you oppress all your workers! Because when you fast, you quarrel and fight and strike the poor with your fist! Fasting like yours today will never make your voice heard on high! Is that the sort of fast that pleases me—a day when people humiliate themselves, hanging their heads like a reed, lying down on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call fasting, a day acceptable to YHWH? On the contrary! This is the sort of fast that pleases me: Remove the chains of injustice! Undo the ropes of the yoke!* Let those who are oppressed go free, and break every yoke you encounter! Share your bread with those who are hungry, and shelter homeless poor people! Clothe those who are naked, and don’t hide from the needs of your own flesh and blood! Do this, and your light will shine like the dawn—and your healing will break forth like lightning! Your integrity will go before you, and the glory of YHWH will be your rearguard. Cry, and YHWH will answer; call, and God will say, ‘I am here’—provided you remove from your midst all oppression, finger pointing, and malicious talk! If you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your shadows will become like noon. YHWH will always guide you, giving relief in desert places. God will give strength to your bones and you will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never run dry. You will rebuild the ancient ruins, and build upon age-old foundations. You will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, and Restorer of Ruined Neighborhoods. If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath and doing business on the holy day, if you call the Sabbath delightful and the day sacred to YHWH honorable, if you honor it by not pursuing your own ways, seeking your own pleasure, or speaking your own words, then will you find your happiness in YHWH, and I will lead you triumphant over the heights of the land.

I will feed you on the heritage of Leah and Rachel and Jacob, your ancestors!” The mouth of YHWH has spoken.

Psalms 103:1-8

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| 1 Bless the Holy One, O my soul, *
and all that is within me, bless God’s holy Name. | 5 You satisfy us with good things, *
and our youth is renewed like an eagle’s. |
| 2 Bless the Holy One, O my soul, *
and forget not all the gifts of God. | 6 O God, you execute righteousness *
and judgment for all who are oppressed. |
| 3 O God, you forgive all our sins *
and you heal all our infirmities; | 7 You made your ways known to Moses *
and your works to the children of Israel. |
| 4 You redeem our life from the grave *
and crown us with mercy and loving-kindness; | 8 You are full of compassion and mercy, *
slow to anger and of great kindness. |

Hebrews 12:18-29

What you have come to is nothing known to the senses: not a blazing fire, or a gloom turning to total darkness, or a storm, or trumpeting thunder, or the great voice speaking such that those hearing it begged that no more be said to them. They couldn’t bear to hear the command, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.” Indeed, so fearful was the spectacle that even Moses said, “I am terrified and trembling.” What you have drawn near to is Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, where myriad angels have gathered for the festival with the whole church—in which everyone is a “firstborn” and a citizen of heaven. You have come to God, the supreme Judge, and have been placed with the spirits of the holy ones who have been made perfect. You have come to Jesus—the mediator who brings

a new Covenant—and to the sprinkled blood which pleads even more insistently than that of Abel. Make sure that you never refuse to listen to the One who speaks. If the people who refused to listen to the warning while on earth didn't escape, how much less will we escape if we refuse to listen to the voice of warning that comes from heaven? God's voice shook the earth then, but now God promises, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." That promise means that the things being shaken are created things, so that only those things that cannot be shaken will remain. Therefore, since we have inherited an unshakeable kingdom, let us thankfully worship God in a way that is acceptable—in reverence and in awe. For our God is a consuming fire.

Luke 13:10-17

For the Good News must first be proclaimed to all. Whenever you are arrested and put on trial, do not fret about what you are going to say. Say whatever is given to you at the time, for it will not be you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. "Sisters and brothers will betray each other to the point of death, and parents will betray their children. Children will rebel against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. Yet the one who perseveres to the end will be saved. "When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' set up where it should not be"—let the reader understand—"then those in Judea must escape to the mountains. Those on the housetop must not come down into the house to collect their belongings. Those in the fields must not take time to pick up their cloaks.

The prophet Isaiah was speaking to Israel in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile. Some, many, of the people had been deported to Babylon and had now returned to Jerusalem—others had stayed behind and managed to eke out an existence—and the two groups were not too fond of each other. They were a people divided—angry, accustomed to the pointing of the finger, to hateful speech. Accustomed to some having more than they need and some having nothing. And if that wasn't bad enough, those inflicting pain and hoarding resources were doing so while hiding behind the cloak of religion.

And so they, God's chosen people, peppered God with questions: Why is it that we pray, fast, and humble ourselves but you don't seem to notice? Why are we so divided? Why is there a gulf between what we ask you for and what the world looks like? Where are you God?" These questions seem, well, timely, to say the least. I have prayed daily for an end to gun violence, yet the news is filled with reports of shootings. I have prayed for an end to white supremacy, yet if anything, it seems to be growing and white supremacists are getting bolder. I have prayed for an end to the refugee crisis at our southern border and the separation of brown immigrant families, yet it is getting worse. I have prayed for an end to the hateful rhetoric we hear from the President, the tv, and yet it seems to be getting louder. The divides, breaches, in our common life are numerous and growing. Some of us eat well while others go hungry. Some of us have far more than we need while some have nothing. Our streets, like those of Isaiah's Jerusalem are not safe for too many of us, especially those who are black or brown. We are separated by race, class, education, political affiliation, and religion. Our social and cultural contexts are vastly different. We are a people of divisions, breaches. As with Isaiah's people many, perhaps all, of our breaches are at root our failure, our refusal, to see those who are different from us as equal, as children of God. Breaches formed by our limited and limiting understanding of God and Creation.

And yet we, with Isaiah's people, look to God and say, "look at us God, we are saying lovely prayers, we are showing up at church on Sunday morning.. most of the time. And we have been doing this for months, years on end. Surely this is enough to please you—to get you to show up and fix this mess". And through Isaiah God's answer is, "Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Rachel, Leah, and Jacob their sins." Apparently God is not thrilled with sackcloth and ashes, weeping and wailing, with kneeling at prayer desks and standing next to the altar. God's question to the people Israel was—where are you and what are you doing? Why aren't you helping those without homes, feeding the hungry, bathing the lepers, and marching with the Black Lives Matter movement? Why aren't you working with refugees or at the clinic with someone waiting for gender reassignment surgery? Why are you not out there comforting and afflicting—reminding the oppressed that they are beloved sons and daughters of God who have inherent dignity and deserve justice—and reminding the wealthy that they are dust? Why are you not doing away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk—which is where most of these breaches begin? It can be, as the Rev. Traci Blackmon says, very difficult to tell that those of us who publicly claim to be Christian are followers of an Afro-Semitic Palestinian from the wrong side of the tracks.

And God says, don't look to me, it is you I have appointed to be repairers of the breach. If you make the decision to stop oppressing others, if you decide to stop blaming other people, if you stop using hateful rhetoric and pointing the finger, if you decide to feed the hungry, to meet the needs of the neediest, then, then I will make you strong and guide you and you will have all that you need to do the work you are doing and you, you will be called the rebuilder of what is broken, repairer of the breach, and restorer of streets to live in.

What Isaiah is talking about is a theology of resistance—resistance to those forces within and around us that set us against each other, resistance to injustice. This theology holds a spiritual and moral understanding of justice that is rooted in the belief that the structure of the universe is on the side of justice. That there is a higher law than human law, moral laws that we cannot violate with impunity any more than we can violate physical laws with impunity, and that to violate moral law causes a breach in our relationship with God and renders us unable to speak on God's behalf. It holds that we cannot have a right relationship with God without doing all we can to have a right relationship with our neighbor—especially the weakest, poorest, least likeable, and most vulnerable of them.

We have imagined a God of favoritism—who has chosen my well being, my security, over that of other parts of God's creation. This theology allows room for complacency, for waiting around for God, because it allows us to interpret the conditions of our current society as the consequence of evil rather than of apathy and inaction. Isaiah is saying it is not faithful to hide our self-interest and inaction under cloaks of feigned righteousness. Not faithful to say a prayer for those who are hurting and not live a prayer. Not faithful to post on facebook and never get our hands dirty. Not faithful to provide charity and resist change. Not faithful to refuse to engage in those acts

that will heal our personal and communal areas of brokenness. Not faithful to avoid speaking truth to power where there is injustice. Not faithful to languish in the breaches of our own making. And while it all feels overwhelming and hopeless, we are not a people without hope. Not a people called to adapt to evil, to brokenness. We are not called to rest content in the breach waiting for an extraordinary person to come along or waiting for God to fix it. We, we, are called to BE repairers of the breach using what God has already done and already given us.

I know we see around us a world that rewards, celebrates breach makers. And it is easy, far too easy, to become residents of the breach rather than repairers. As divisions among us harden, more resources siphoned from those in need and hoarded by those with plenty, as our national discourse descends further into coarseness and insults shouted at each other from our corners, it is easy to forget our shared humanity, easy to fall into anger and despair, easy to lose hope. So we must hang on with all our strength, we must look for repairers—because they are in our midst—look around this room and you will see some lurking right here. We must look for glimmers of light, of hope, of resistance. We must be givers of grace and love—recognizing that repairing breaches often begins with words— with small personal actions, with laughter, with a well placed question or a small gesture. It begins in our everyday lives as we interact with others and make decisions, consciously or not, about how we respond to others. Do we share that mean spirited post on facebook or not? Even if it is taking a shot at an injustice, is it shining a spotlight on that injustice or is it attacking the dignity of another human being? As the Quakers would say, when considering saying anything: “Is it true? Is it from love? Is it necessary?” I want to be clear, I am not saying we should not confront evil and injustice, as followers of Christ, we must. But we cannot confront evil and injustice by dehumanizing others. We cannot, to paraphrase Nietzsche, become a monster to defeat the monster.

We are not all going to be the next Martin Luther King Jr. or Sister Mary Scullion, but we are all called to be imitators of Christ—which means living and acting from a place of respect for the dignity of others, from a place of love. Faithfulness requires more than thoughts and prayers, more than ritualistic actions, it requires behavior that strives for reparation. It requires us to break the yoke, stop the pointing of the finger, feed the hungry, care for the needy. Then, then the Lord will guide us and satisfy us with good things. Then, then, you shall be called a repairer of the breach, and you shall be like a spring whose waters never fail.