

Sermon Preached for Evensong at St. Michael's Church, Bristol RI. On December 10, 2019.

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It's the most wonderful time of the year.

After I read this passage from Isaiah, I was transported to sermon preparation for Ash Wednesday. I found myself excited by the prospect of the yearly tune up of Lent. Where my wheels get an alignment for driving in the lane that I've been assigned. And who doesn't love a good fast?

This passage is a reminder of the freedom we've been given because God knows we need this gift. This passage asks, what good are our faith practices if they aren't changing us in a way that strengthens us for service and response to our communities' well-being?

I wonder how Jesus felt when he first heard this passage? Living in an occupied state, living in a society that required him to not stick out too much for fear of reprisal from the authorities, living in a culture that placed the heavy mantle of an honor-based society on his shoulders, what did Jesus think? Living for honor could have deadly consequences.

None of his or anyone else's adherence to these restrictions helped them to live full lives. Following every religious rule didn't bring them any closer to what they could feel in their bones was the life they could have, even if they couldn't name it. There had to be more, but what more could they do? Couldn't God hear their plea for a better life?

I wonder if on first hearing this scripture Jesus said, "That's what I'm going to do when I grow up! I am the repairer of the breach." Repairing the breach is a concept in the Jewish community that literally means repairing the world - a call to social justice - it is the same concept as MLK's beloved community.

On first hearing this scripture, I wonder if Jesus could feel the energy and hope in these words? Could he feel the abundance that is only available to us when God's people come together with concern and action one for the other? Could he feel the release from a pedantic adherence to religious practices that were more about do it yourself salvation rather than a relationship that freely flows between the Divine and God's people?

There are days when I don't want to read or hear the news.

Our politics have left us so divided as a nation. The institutions that we have leaned on seem to be failing us. Our culture has elevated self-sufficiency as an admirable trait along with competition, winners, or losers.

Our young people, our future, have grown up in a society that causes them to be anxious. They're concerned about the state of this world; people and our natural resources. They want to know what will be left for them and future generations?

When human brokenness is out of control, and our ability to fix it seems useless, our human limitations, our smallness can become unbearable. It is at times like this when we look for ways to soothe ourselves. It is human nature to cope by putting our head in the sand, or the opposite, over-functioning. It's hard to find a balance.

Likewise, for people engaged in social justice work, it is hard to find a balance of where to place our energies. One has to work hard to develop the capacity to share a concern for others and to not fall into the trap of my pain is worse than your pain, my exclusion is worse than your exclusion, my cause is more worthy than your cause. It's not a contest.

As a rector in an inner-city church in Detroit, in the poorest zip code in the state, I hated how the church was so distracted by matters of human sexuality. Within my first month as a rector, a wealthy man who rarely came to church, enlisted someone to approach me about having a conversation concerning what he described as the church's error of including gay people as clergy. He wanted to donate money, or so it was said, to renovate the oldest part of the building.

I wanted the money. I didn't want to have the conversation. I didn't want to remind him that in the same way people were using the Bible to exclude gay people, they had used it to exclude us. Black people. I was tired of the argument.

I also knew there was a group of people working to restrict our ministry to people experiencing homelessness in the neighborhood of our church. The response I sent to him was this, "I'm more than willing to have a conversation about homosexuality and the church after there are no more women and children sleeping on the street and going to bed hungry." Boy was I satisfied with my clever response. He gave a modest donation after that.

We never talked about either. I wonder if I lost an opportunity.

There were members of my congregation who were gay. One couple had been together for over 40 years, they were active in ministry and support of the congregation, and were an example of fidelity and love. They knew they had my support, but did they need me to have that conversation publicly, or was I supposed to find or invite others to wage that war? Was this just a fight of distraction, or was this a moment where both issues could be taken on by including more members in the conversation? Was this an opportunity to grow in our understanding about the intersections of excluded and oppressed people?

I wonder what Martin of Tours thought of his world. He noticed and was moved by the plight of the poor in his community. I'm sure he was concerned about heresy but did not want to get bogged down by those fights. It's hard to know sometimes which fight is ours to take up. When do we deviate from the struggle we're engaged in?

It's striking that Martin of Tours was unwilling to get embroiled in fighting heresy. What difference did the splitting of theological hairs make to a person who has no food or shelter?

The church's arguments over who's in & who's out, all the things we argue over; about how to do church right, _____ are often a distraction from the work we're called to do. With so much time spent on arguing instead of doing the work, where have our quarrels gotten us? The disagreements that we put in the space that occupies our fears; that justice will never come, that God doesn't hear us, and a need for control, that space belongs to God. God longs to fill it with life instead of fear.

Through Isaiah the Divine says,

*I will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong.*

There may be no immediate relief in God's call to the long haul of commitment to consistent faith practices and compassionate noticing and response to the world. When we face outward as God calls us to do, I think what scares us is our fear that we are not enough, or that God is not enough.

Like those Israelites following exile, we wonder if the ruins will ever be restored. Hasn't every generation faced that on some level? Seeking justice is hard work. The Israelites forgot that the faith practices were for shaping people to have a God-shaped heart. The practices were meant to strengthen the individual so the community would also be strengthened.

If we remember this, I doubt we'd feel so overwhelmed by the needs of our world. I doubt we would feel the need to get caught up in quarrels about who to support. I doubt we would think it is all up to us.

That's where we're like the people in our lesson. They thought they could save themselves. We often think we can save the world if we do more of just the right things, we will accomplish it. We need saving just like everyone else.

There are days when I wonder if what we do makes a difference. When I want to say, "We aren't like those who do justice work for the sake of news coverage, or because we have a savior complex. We've done all the good things we can do God. Why don't you hear us?"

There's always a cause. There's always someone who wants us to pick a side or to join them, or to show up. My mother always told me, "you can't dance on every set". Or, "you only have one behind, you can't ride 10 horses."

God can be Godself without us. We've just been invited to the party. This new Bishop is preaching to herself now. Not only can I not do it all, to try to is not an act of joining

God's mission, but seeking to please others and get a name for myself and not for the cause. In this passage, I'm feeling the freedom of sticking with the faith practices, because they keep me sharp, grounded, and connected. I'm feeling the freedom to not be ruled by shoulds and people-pleasing.

If we'd allow it, God can be God all by Godself. What a freeing notion. We are called to live within the bounds of our peopleness. We can let go of over-functioning and trust there will be someone to do what you can't in your desire to work with God to change the world in your longing to build beloved community.

There are practical actions we can take. Remember to take time for practices that support our call. I'm reminded of how Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. laid out a rule of life for himself and those who worked with him to build beloved community, time for action, prayer, self-care. -

Look for community and connection We must be supportive of each other and the work of social justice in a wholistic way, by that I mean showing up when we can, giving financial support, prayers, and increasing others' awareness of the possibility of connection.

Community organizing 101 will tell you to remember that this is people work. When we come together, we need to acknowledge the human parts of us that need basics; food, child friendly spaces and meeting at times that allow participation from a wider cross section of people concerned about justice. Remember to celebrate.

Balance. God says to us, "I want you to be a watered spring that never runs dry. Is that your desire for yourself?"

Not only do we desire peace and wholeness for the world, but we also hope for the same for ourselves, as does God. God loves us enough for this to be a reality for us today, as we wait for the fullness of God's dream.

Today we are celebrating the 80th anniversary of the Episcopal peace fellowship on the day before Armistice Day, which is the day EPF was started. In 1918, on the 11th month, on the 11th day at the 11th hour, a fragile peace accord to end World War I went into effect. People hoped it would be so and hoped it would last even though the fighting hadn't stopped until the end of the day.

Today we also celebrate Martin of Tours, who devoted his life to noticing and ministering to the poor. Even when he could've been dragged into the lure of arguing heresy, the plight of the poor was more compelling. Not averting his gaze or attention, Bishop Martin was devout in his service and in the practices that lead to a Jesus centered life.

When was the first time that you noticed that there was injustice in this world? And when did you feel that you were called to be part of making things right? What influenced you, and how did you feel? In that moment of noticing, what do you think

made you believe that things should or could be different? Now imagine all the other people who've had similar experiences, the energy, conviction, and stirring of them all. What power and connection in this room alone.

All the things that happened to bring us to this day of celebrating and connecting. This is not about us, but it's about the heart of Christ within us, stirring us to trust that God hears us and is using our lives - prayer, action, commitment, financial contributions, joys, and pains - all of us to rebuild the world.

I'd like to say thank you to the Episcopal Peace Fellowship for being that prophetic voice who, while perhaps not shouting as Isaiah was instructed to do in this passage, is consistently keeping us mindful, noticing and responsive. Thank you for helping the church and society to grow in their capacity as repairers of the world. With God's help, through God's initiation. We are repairers of the breach because God has named us such, not because we are remarkable on our own.

Through our baptism and by God's grace, we are those who have been called to this work, to build beloved community, to be beloved community. It's the most wonderful time in our lives when we let God be God's self; and remember we're just invited to the party.