

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
5th Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 5, 2017

**Then Your Light Shall Rise**

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-17

Introduction of scripture readings:

Before reading the scripture,  
it might be good to mention that these are the passages assigned by the lectionary for today.

Presbyterian preachers are always completely free to depart from the lectionary  
and select our own scriptures for preaching,  
and sometimes we do.

But the discipline of the 3-year cycle of lectionary preaching  
means rather than simply preaching from the texts we would select on our own  
we are pressed into consideration of texts we might not know as well,  
and sometimes texts that we might rather avoid.

I like to think God has a sense of humor,  
which is sometimes evident in what shows up in the lectionary at any given time.  
As if God is saying...**"Here! Have fun with this one!"**

So let's just acknowledge that in our current context  
this Old Testament passage could sound a little political.  
But that shouldn't be too surprising,  
since it surely sounded exceedingly political in its original context.

So with open minds, and open hearts, as we approach the reading of scripture,  
let us **pray for the Illumination of the Holy Spirit:**

*O God of light,  
your Spirit searches and reveals and illumines our lives  
through the words of scripture.  
Be radiant in your church today  
and move us by the power of your Word  
to be light by doing what you command;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**READ ISAIAH 58:1-12; MATTHEW 5:12-17**

This passage from the prophet Isaiah  
comes from the final section of the book, chapters 56-66,  
often called Third Isaiah.

The original Isaiah preached in Jerusalem before the Exile, from 738 until 701 BCE,  
and is found in the first 39 chapters.  
His preaching was so momentous that he gathered a whole school of prophetic disciples  
who carried on his preaching tradition, long after his time.

About a century and a half later, around 540 BCE, during the Exile,  
one of the prophets in the Isaiah school,  
foresaw the liberation of Judah from captivity in Babylon,  
and the glorious restoration of the promised land.  
We now know these writings as Second Isaiah.  
and find them in chapters 40-55.

Not long after the return of the exiles,  
another voice was added, Third Isaiah, who prophesies in Jerusalem and Judea.  
He preaches to the Exiles who have returned home  
but who are frustrated because the temple still lies in ruins,  
and they are asking,  
Why will the Lord not complete our restoration to glory.<sup>1</sup>

The Lord charges the prophet to say to the people  
it is because they have gone far astray from God's law  
and are deluding themselves with their religious observance,  
thinking of themselves as faithful  
when in fact they have fallen into deep hypocrisy  
and blatantly self-serving behavior.  
**It's not a very happy message for the prophet to deliver  
or for the people to hear.**

The people ask the Lord,  
*Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?*  
And the Lord replies straightforwardly through Isaiah:  
*Because you are only serving your own interest in all this worship,  
while you oppress the people who are providing your comfort.*

Now it may be hard for us to relate to all this talk of fasting.  
Fasting does not accompany our prayer life  
the way it has for many of the faithful of prior generations.

So our question becomes,  
**if we do not fast,  
what are our acts of spiritual piety that we think are bringing us closer to God  
but that lose their meaning when they are not followed  
by a life of justice and compassion?**

What of our baptismal liturgy, or our confirmation process?  
What of our ceremonies of Christian marriage?

What of our carefully prepared communion table,  
and our solemn procession of trays?  
What of our fellowship with other Christians?  
What of our morning prayers, or prayers at meals,  
or at night before bed?  
What if even our Bible studies and theological discussions  
are a cover for a life of hypocrisy?

Like the worship practices of Israel, these are all good things.  
But if they do not lead to a life of justice and compassion,  
do they please God?

When Third Isaiah asks these rather embarrassing questions to the people of Jerusalem,  
he follows immediately with a word about what the Lord desires,  
about the fast the Lord chooses:

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice  
to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked to cover them,  
and not to ignore your brothers and sisters in need?*

And at this point,  
the Lord, speaking through the prophet,  
reminds the people that this covenant on which they are relying,  
is a two way street.  
It is a conditional "If...Then" Covenant.

"IF" you care about justice to those who are oppressed,  
*"THEN" your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly...*

"IF" you have compassion for the weak and the vulnerable,  
*THEN you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you call cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am...*

"IF" you recognize how your comfort is dependent on the work of others,  
*THEN your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday..."*

The fast that pleases God is no mere religious ritual.

It is obedience to the Torah of God, which consists of acts of justice and liberation,  
and compassionate care for the hungry, homeless, and the naked.

This is the social gospel preached not only by Third Isaiah  
but by the rest of the prophets."<sup>2</sup>

It is this kind of message that led to the prophets' being persecuted.

So let's bring these prophetic words into our current context.

When Isaiah charges, *you oppress all your workers*,  
is this still a word from the Lord for us today?

Who are we to think of when we hear this passage?

Well, who works for us?

Who grew the coffee we drank this morning, and were they paid a fair wage?  
Who sewed together the clothes that we are wearing today?  
Who assembled the car we drove to church?  
Who baked the bread that is on our table?  
Who bottled the juice?  
How about the money with which we bought these things?  
Did any of it come from investments? Mutual funds maybe?  
Do we know about the business and labor practices of the companies  
in whose profits we share via the stock market?  
Are we less culpable just because we never have met them?

You know it's interesting.

Christians these days will stop giving to their church at the drop of a hat  
if there's one little thing they disagree with?  
But I wonder if we have the same standards of righteousness  
for the investments from which we are making a profit?

Having asked these questions,

we also need to be clear and careful:

This call from the prophet Isaiah  
does not enshrine any particular policy or ideology.

It does **not** spell out **exactly how** to grow a fair economy,  
or what fair taxation looks like,  
or how to provide welfare without creating welfare dependency  
and undermining a healthy work ethic,  
or how to achieve harmonious race relations,  
or how to welcome strangers  
while still protecting ourselves from those who would do us harm.

**These important practicalities are things we will have to hammer out.**  
**But this call from Isaiah makes it very clear**  
**that our social and economic relations in this world**  
**matter to God.**

Isaiah and the rest of the Old Testament  
will not let us pretend that they are separate.

We learn from Isaiah

that the problem of good jobs and fair wages matters to God;  
and that "our integrity as Christians  
depends upon our efforts to overcome the injustice  
which is the other side of our own privileges...  
"The question of social compassion [and social justice]  
is not a secondary or dispensable aspect of Christianity,  
but the moral heart of the Christian faith."<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah rebukes the people for losing their hearts of compassion.

This is seen not only in their willingness to ignore those they oppress

but also in their readiness *to quarrel and to fight,*  
*to strike with a wicked fist,*  
*to point the finger,*  
*and to speak evil of one another...*

That is to say that one of the clear symptoms of this great sickness of self-centered piety,  
is when we are caught up in blaming everyone else for our problems  
and the problems of our world —  
everyone else but ourselves.

And that has become a favorite American pastime these days, hasn't it?

We excel at the pointing of the finger,  
and the speaking of evil.

We blame the liberals or the conservatives,  
the Republicans or the Democrats,  
the Muslims or the Jews or those other kinds of Christians.

The charge of Third Isaiah could have been written yesterday.

Jesus says —

in the same spirit of these Old Testament prophets

Jesus says —

*"You are the salt of the earth;*  
*but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?"*

Are we, as Jesus says, *no longer good for anything,*  
but to be *thrown out and trampled under foot?*

Or is there hope for us?

**Friends, hear the good news.**

**There is always hope in Jesus Christ.**

**There is always hope in Jesus Christ!**

Jesus has shown us that God will not give up on the world  
or on the church.

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On Wednesday night last week

our guest speaker was Jean Fontaine,

a Presbyterian who lives here in Greenville,

who served for several months in Colombia, South America

with Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.

While in Colombia, she would occasionally see groups of people  
gathered in the church on a weekday, fervently praying.

When she asked the Pastor — Pastor Omar — about these groups,  
he said that sometimes it happens that a group of people  
will begin fasting in the morning,  
and gather at the church to pray and sing until mid-day,  
when they would then return to their homes.

Jean and Omar began talking about the different practices of worship  
there in Colombia and here in the US.

Omar was very surprised to learn that fasting is rare among Presbyterians in the US.

When Jean asked why they do it,

Omar answered that

“Of course, it’s because the Presbyterian missionaries  
who came and helped us start the church 150 years ago,  
told us this is what we should do.

**Evidently,” said Omar, “the fathers taught the sons, and then the fathers forgot.”**

Later in their conversation

Jean described mission activities undertaken by our congregations —  
hot meals for the hungry, food banks, clothing banks,  
quilts and personal care items,  
transportation assistance, and housing projects  
like Habitat for Humanity.

Omar brightened and said,

**“Oh, you practice the fast of Isaiah. You feed the hungry!”**

So perhaps we have learned a thing or two from Isaiah and Jesus.

As American Christians in a modern democracy,

we have a voice and a vote and therefore we have some measure of influence  
on how we as a society treat the weak and the vulnerable.

We are therefore called by the prophet to be engaged politically  
in seeking liberty and justice for all.

But while we wrangle over exactly how to do that, and exactly what justice looks like —  
and we seem to be in a time of intense wrangling at the moment —  
in the meantime,

our neighbors are in need.

In the meantime,

we have homeless families coming to live with us several times a year.

Have you ever signed up to help with GAIHN?

The information you need is right there in the bulletin.

In the meantime,

we can build homes with Habitat for Humanity.

Have you signed up to help yet?

Again, all you need to know is right there in the bulletin.

In the meantime,  
we can give our time, our energy, and our money  
to sustain the work of this congregation  
as we seek to be a compassionate presence in the world.  
Are you giving? Are you giving sacrificially?

In the meantime, says Jesus,  
*You are the light of the world.  
No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,  
but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.*

*In the same way, let your light shine before others,  
so that they may see your good works  
and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

May it be so among us.

<sup>1</sup> Sibley Towner, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 315

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 317

<sup>3</sup> John C. Bennett, *Social Salvation: A Religious Approach to the Problems of Social Change* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935) 91