

Henrietta United Church of Christ

Rev. Martha Koenig Stone

February 5, 2017 - Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

“Looking In, Reaching Out”

Introduction: We’ve been reading a lot lately from the book of Isaiah, that prophet who spoke so powerfully to the people of Israel, who interpreted God’s vision for them during their time in exile. Today’s reading portrays a people, wishing to do God’s will, fasting and praying to God, but missing the mark – and God, calling them back to a better way. And although these words were written thousands of years ago, they still ring true today, calling us back to God’s paths, reminding us of what a life centered on God’s goodness looks like, both for individuals and for communities. You’ll notice that the reading includes a kind of dialog between God and the people. So I’d like your help in reading this morning. You’ll see in your bulletin three sets of words in bold. The first part is 2-lines long: it’s the voice of the people speaking to God. The other two short phrases are part of God’s response. I invite you to read these parts of the text as they come up in the reading—I’ll cue you when it’s time for each of the three parts. Now let’s listen for God’s Word in the words of Isaiah:

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-14

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,

to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me

and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness

and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgments,

they delight to draw near to God. They call out:

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?”

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,

and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight

and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today

will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose,

a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,

and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,

a day acceptable to the LORD?

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 hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you,

and the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;

*you shall cry for help, and God will say, **Here I am.***

If you remove the yoke from among you,

the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

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.

The LORD will guide you continually,

and satisfy your needs in parched places,

and make your bones strong;

and you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;

you shall raise up the foundations

of many generations;

you shall be called the repairer of the breach,

the restorer of streets to live in.

If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,

from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;

if you call the Sabbath a delight

and the holy day of the LORD honorable;

if you honor it, not going your own ways,

servicing your own interests,

or pursuing your own affairs;

then you shall take delight in the LORD,

and I will make you ride upon the heights of the

earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your

ancestor Jacob,

for the mouth of God has spoken.

Sermon:

Did you hear anything in the reading that struck a chord for you today?

Granted, we're not in exile like the Israelites of Isaiah's day. But we are in a time of transition, as our newly-elected President begins his term of office. As is true for any new president, these first few weeks and months will be scrutinized carefully, by citizens of our country and by members of other nations as well. People are watching for what is done in those critical "first 100 days," trying to discern the tone and the vision of this administration. Folks from both sides of the aisle will praise what they think is good for the nation, and critique what they think is not so good.

Some leaders and some citizens are afraid of critique – they say it shows disloyalty, a lack of commitment to the administration, or a lack of respect for the democratic process, or even a lack of patriotism. But here's the thing: a democratic nation cannot function without a good measure of critique. In fact, our founders wrote critique right into the fabric of our democracy, with the two-party system, and the checks and balances of the three branches of government, and the balance among federal rights and states' rights and individual rights.

Where did they get this idea? They got it in part, from their own experience of tyranny—where decisions were made from the top down, without input from the people. They didn't like that very much. They saw how it stifles truth and creativity, how it prevents people from following their conscience and following their deeply held beliefs. They didn't want to be told what to do or how to think or how to worship. They also knew about the value of critique from their religious heritage—the heritage of the Christian Reformation—a tradition that holds human practices up to the scrutiny of God's vision for the world—a tradition that is constantly reshaping itself as it tries to live out God's vision in each new age—a tradition whose roots go all the way back to the days of the Old Testament writings, like Isaiah, which are full of critique and self-reflection—a tradition that gave birth to the teachings of Jesus, who extended that prophetic witness to people of many nations.

Because of this heritage of critique, religious people down through the ages have designed practices like fasting and meditation and prayer that are designed to bring them back to their center, back to God, back to right paths. That's what religious Israelites were doing in the time of Isaiah. In an effort to preserve their tradition, to remember God's ways, and to keep their people strong, they tried to continue observing the religious rituals like fasting, which they remembered from their home in Israel. They hoped that, if they just remained faithful, God would hear their cries. They longed for a time when God would bring them home.

Isaiah, however, was not impressed with the formal rituals of the faith, because he saw that the people were not putting that faith into action in their relationships with others. He had some pretty harsh critique for his people, a message from God: "You think you're so righteous, but look how you're living! You only look out for your own interests. You've forgotten completely about the wellbeing of others. You oppress your workers. You quarrel all the time. Do you think you can make up for it just by kneeling in prayer now and then? Fasting, sackcloth, ashes – that won't do the trick. You've got to get to work and take care of each other. That's what my people are supposed to do!"

Now, Isaiah knew the importance of prayer. He prayed a fair bit himself. He knew there's a time to look within, to examine our hearts and souls and listen for the voice of God. But he also knew that there's a time to get moving, and put into action God's vision of abundant life for all people. And so Isaiah got pretty specific in telling folks how to bring that vision to life. "Stop injustice; free the oppressed; share your bread with the hungry and your homes with the homeless; don't run away from people in need. And don't say evil things. Stop blaming each other; don't point your finger at someone else, as if you've never done anything wrong yourself!"

Start rebuilding what's ruined; lay a foundation for future generations; restore relationships; make your streets livable again." Isaiah knew that, whether the people lived in Babylon or Assyria or Palestine or anywhere else, God expected them to treat each other with kindness and justice and hospitality. And he knew that if the people started looking out for each other and not just for themselves, it would enrich their lives immeasurably—he said they would be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that is never empty—which for people who live in the desert is an image of life itself. Without concern for one another, humanity becomes parched and dry, and may even wither and die.

I hear in Isaiah's words a clear message to our own culture, right now in 2017. As our president experiments with various ways of asserting authority and clamping down, supposedly in the interest of law and order, I hear Isaiah's words echoing a warning: *You serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.* Executive orders that ban immigrants and build walls and punish cities that desire to offer sanctuary to refugees are a far cry from God's watered garden where the hungry are met with bread and the homeless are offered shelter. Fear of other cultures, love of wealth, and a desire to rule the world threaten to cut America off from its friends and neighbors and to set us at odds with would-be enemies. We pray for God's protection. We say "God bless America" over and over. But we are not always willing to do the things that God requires. We hesitate to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly. We are tempted to think that the blessings of this free country are ours and ours alone, to be guarded instead of shared. And so, to us, God says: "This is not the fast that I choose."

I am encouraged that, in this last week, Americans of all religious persuasions are beginning to wake up and speak out about the disconnect between repressive policies of the current administration and the founding principles of our nation—principles based on freedom of religion, freedom from persecution, and a welcome for immigrants and refugees. Folks are starting to remember that, for centuries, our country has said to the world, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore! Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me! I lift my lamp upon the golden shore." We are reminding one another how, for all of our history, people from many lands have responded to that vision of freedom and diversity and hospitality, joining the great American experiment, lending their skills and their dreams and their hard work to this country. Americans are realizing that this is too precious a gift to throw away. And so we are hearing many voices of critique these days, calling us back to right paths, lifting up again the promise of a watered garden where all people are treated with respect and love.

As I was thinking about the plight of refugees around the world this week, I came across an article in the NY Times about a refugee family that has just arrived in the US.¹ They had fled a civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2010, where two of their family members—a grandfather and an uncle—had been killed by rebel forces, and where the dad was a target for the rebels, because he worked in a hospital. One week after shooters entered his house looking for him, he took his family and moved to Malawi. They lived in a refugee camp in Malawi for six years, along with 20,000 other refugees, including people from Somalia, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Burundi. They had only a simple mud hut with a thatched roof. The dad, who is a nurse, routinely delivered babies in the camp. And the mother worked sewing clothes. But they dreamed of a day when they could leave the camp and resume a normal life. After numerous interviews and years of waiting, they were finally approved for resettlement, but they weren't sure they would be allowed in the country because of political developments here. With the help of Church World Service, though, they were indeed allowed to board the plane to New York. You may remember that Church World Service is one of the outstanding mission

¹ Robbins, Liz. "Congolese Family Warmly Embraced at a Precarious Time for Refugees," *The New York Times*. 1 Feb 2017, p. A14. Print.

arms of the church, which HUCC has supported for many years with many dollars. So when I read about this, I immediately felt connected to this family. I felt as though they were my brothers and sisters, part of Christ's body, finally on their way to safety! Well, they finally landed and got off the plane at JFK airport, where the dad had to undergo one final interview, answering questions again about why they had left home, his line of work, and his family. Finally they were approved for entry, and volunteers drove the family to Poughkeepsie, where they are being sponsored by an Episcopal church. As they got out of the van at their new home, they stepped into snow for the first time! The smiling faces on the kids say it all. I've posted the article on the bulletin board so you can read the full article.

Reading this story filled me with hope for the world, because it reminded me that there are still people who hear and heed God's call to make a place for strangers and to welcome those in need. I found myself searching the web for other stories of refugees and how they are faring. I was reminded about our own refugee resettlement program here in Rochester, and of how many different ethnic groups we have welcomed in this city of tremendous vitality and diversity. Did you know we even have some Syrians here? I found myself determined to keep on working on rebuilding the ruins and laying the foundation for God's well-watered garden. I know this won't always be easy or safe. As one spiritual writer says, "...in a world cynical and afraid, it takes courage to be kind and generous of spirit, and to fight for mercy and justice.² But it is our calling as Christians and our privilege as human beings to care for one another, and to commit ourselves to acts of kindness and inclusion and healing. And so I pray that we may each find the courage to put our prayers into action and to play our part in the abundant life God desires for us all.

Let us pray: Holy One, remind us today of the many hands that have helped us and the many hearts that have welcomed us and the many strong arms that have paved the way for us to flourish. Then give us the grace to do the same for others, that your people may flourish in peace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

² Hershey, Terry. "How Then Shall We Live?" *Sabbath Moment*. terryhershey.com, 29 Jan, 2017. Web.