

“Good News”

Often, when I get stuck thinking about the readings for a Sunday and how to communicate and illuminate them, I go back to the old saw which asks, “What is the Good News in this?” Preachers are called to offer Good News just as Jesus did. Remember in Luke, Jesus is given the scroll of the book of Isaiah to read in the synagogue on the Sabbath. He opens the scroll and reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because he has anointed me / to bring good news to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to set free those who are oppressed, / to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Following in the footsteps of the Apostles whom Jesus commissioned to carry the Good News out into the world, clergy are called to do likewise. Any preacher who does not preach good news is shirking his or her duty.

Admittedly, sometimes it would be easier to preach fire and brimstone to a congregation. Especially, a congregation that is misbehaving, not caring for brother and sister, ignoring the poor and downtrodden, setting up some idol such as wealth, politics, or celebrity to worship instead of worshipping God.

When we look at today’s readings, we see some immense fault-finding (not that it isn’t warranted). In the passage from Isaiah, God goes on a great tear, castigating the people of Israel (Jacob’s other name) for being unfaithful to God and God’s laws.

As Isaiah knows, we all need good news at some time or another. At times like the ones, we are living in now, with wars in progress, nuclear treaties expiring, threats from one country against another on trade or military action, fights about immigration policy at home and in foreign lands, global wealth inequity, and so much more, most of us could use a moment or two of tranquility, hope, and gospel (i.e., good news). As the old hymn says, “I come to the garden alone ... And He walks with me, and He talks with me, And He tells me I am His own, And the joy we share as we tarry there, None other has ever known.”

Oh, yes, we want that, and God knows we want it. But God knows also that we do not deserve comfort when we deny comfort to others. We do not deserve God’s care if we deny our care to others. That is where the words from Isaiah come in. God says through Isaiah, “Announce to my people their rebellion, / to the house of Jacob their sins.” God is furious with the people of Israel. They look for God’s mercy. They fast, expecting a reward. They question the point of fasting if it does not please God. They question why they humble themselves when God doesn’t notice.

God responds frankly, saying, “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers.” There is a frank retort. What you think you are doing for me is serving your own needs. What’s more, you are oppressing others. God follows by pointing out, “Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” Your fast is supposed to be for building peace, and instead, you quarrel and fight. Your fasting serves no holy purpose because it does not change you. God reminds us that prayer, fasting, meditation, worship, and indeed all spiritual disciplines are to bring us closer to God and more in harmony with others. If it doesn’t, the fasting and prayers are hollow and only for show.

He calls us to do righteousness. He tells his people that the fast he chooses is not the performative one, but “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of

the yoke, to let the oppressed go free.” Not only that, but to also feed the hungry and clothe the naked. God says that when we can do that, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.” And later, he says, “then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom be like the noonday.”

These promises are like what Jesus says in the passage from Matthew. He tells us that salt is only good when it is salty. That is, when we live God’s commandments with truth, we will be just right. When we don’t, our faithfulness is no better than flat salt, which is thrown on the path and ground into the earth.

If we are to be the light of the world as God calls us to in Isaiah, we must show the light into the world. If we hide the light that Jesus has implanted in us for fear of being embarrassed in front of our neighbors, coworkers, or a person on the street, the light might as well not have been lit. You do not have to accost people with your faith, but let your faith shine forth from your countenance. Give a hand to someone in need or hurting. Remember, the earliest followers of Jesus were not called Christians, but rather People of the Way. People knew they were his followers by the way they loved each other, the stranger, and the needy.

By living the commandments of God as found in the Hebrew Bible, we are doing the will of God. By living by those laws and teaching others to do likewise, we will be called “great in the kingdom of heaven.”

As the psalmist wrote:

*the righteous will be kept in everlasting remembrance.
They will not be afraid of any evil rumors; *
their heart is right;
they put their trust in the Lord.*

*They have given freely to the poor, *
and their righteousness stands fast for ever;
they will hold up their head with honor.*

The promises of God are great. They come across the arc of the Bible—Isaiah, the Psalms, Paul’s letters, and the Gospels. There is so much we need to do to repair ourselves and to be the repairers of the breaches in our society, but it is never too late. We can be the bearers of good news to the poor, orphaned, widowed, oppressed, captive, and givers of sight to the blind. It is our choice: let us go forth to repair this broken world, knowing God is with us.