

Sermon “Pushing Boundaries”
Kirk of St James
Sunday November 13th, 2022
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

I have had this idea for a couple of years but executing it has not been practical since the pandemic started. I would like to make a temporary display in our upper hall on one of the walls. My idea was to gather some favourite memories or ways the Kirk has been important in your life. I would love to do a section of the people and groups who use our space on a weekly basis, to show some of the ways we try to support the community and some of the people who call us home. I would love to have a section that lists all of our hobbies and groups we are a part of places where we volunteer our time and resources and see how far our community and our work expand out into the world through the course of a week and beyond. I imagine the web we would create would be inspiring, because I know you, and I am always in awe of you as a community. That our faith goes beyond these walls on Sunday is imperative, a lesson the Israelites are learning today.

The book of Isaiah is a rich and deep well that speaks to many aspects of human suffering and triumph and it can be broken down into several distinct sections. The first section deals with the judgement and exile that will come upon the people of Judah, the second section moves to their buoyant optimism for the future, and the third and final section ends with a more realistic picture of restored life in Jerusalem. While our passage in Isaiah 65 today is uplifting it had taken the people a long time to get there. A few chapters earlier we find a section of Isaiah where the people of God feel disillusioned. These upstanding, good religious folk believed God had abandoned them. Why? Because they no longer sensed God’s presence amongst them, and they didn’t know why. After all, they had been meticulous in their religious observance. The members engaged in theological study. They practiced all the proper cultic rites, and they even fasted to publicly demonstrate their faithfulness to God. Despite all the religious observances, God did not seem to have noticed. Or worse, perhaps God did not care. “The silence of God,” said Tennessee Williams, “is a terrible thing, and the whole world is lost because of it.”

However, upon closer listening we notice that God was not silent. God, in fact, did speak to his people. God responded to their murmuring, and it was the kind of answer that made you

yearn for silence again. Through the prophet Isaiah, God declared to the congregation of believers that it was not God who had forsaken them; but they who had forsaken God. It is not God who wandered away from the people; but the people who had wandered away from God. God said, “Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins... as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God.” (Isaiah 58:1, 2)

This divine proclamation no doubt startled and mystified the people. Had God not paid attention? Had God been distracted and not noticed what they had been doing? They practiced righteousness. They had prayed the right prayers, sung the correct hymns, collected an offering at each worship service, and they even made public their observances so that the world could witness their humble piety. What sin and rebellion was God talking about? They missed the point. Their worship was narrow and insular. It did nothing to bring compassion, hope and justice to the people beyond their worship space.

In other words, if the people had taken the time to look into the eyes of their brothers and sisters outside their church walls, they would have realized that God was present precisely where they would least have expected to find God. Instead, God was present bringing hope and dignity to children whose culture and identity had been stripped from them by the prevailing powers. Likewise, God was not with them as they bowed down their heads “like a bulrush” (Isaiah 58:5).

Instead, God was present in the places of unimaginable misery in the world where hunger, despair and disease hover in the environment like a persistent flu virus. God was not with them as they made public their “righteous fasting.” Instead, God was bringing comfort to the broken and those who felt lost. Please do not misunderstand. It is not that worship is not important. It is. However, what God was calling the people of faith to do was to close the gap between their worship rites and their conduct towards their neighbours who were in want and need.

When we finally turn to the passage in Isaiah today it is important to remember it through this lens of intense struggle. The people of Judah have suffered. The loss of their temple and

exile from their land was a time of weeping. They had built houses and not lived in them, they planted vineyards and never tasted their fruit, and there was much to mourn. Throughout the years their hope and optimism carried them through. Their commitment was tested when they were finally allowed to return to their land and were faced with the monumental task of rebuilding a ruined city, a ruined temple, and a ruined Judah. The people in the chapters leading up to this vision in Isaiah 65 are filled with pessimism as they deal with the very down to earth problems of wickedness, bloodshed, miscarriages of justice, false worship, and leaders who are blind and greedy drunkards. The struggle of rebuilding their lives feels impossible and that is why the vision of Isaiah 65 is important. It is a reminder that while life feels like it has been falling down around them and there is no good to be found, that God is in fact there and He has a vision and a plan.

This vision is one of wholeness. It is where life is lived fully, and your hard work brought to completion. A world where their decedents will live full lives. A world where even the biggest enemies can live peacefully side by side. This Utopia does not rest on the destruction of the world as we know it, but rather calls upon the original creation that God called good. One biblical commentator summed this up beautifully when she wrote:

“The totality of Jesus’ life provides a whole new framework for understanding Isaiah’s prophecy...Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection provides the world a new set of lenses for the world to engage in the new creation, not as a goal to be looked for off in the distance, but one to be realized here and now. The text describes radical living conditions in the New Jerusalem, including low infant mortality, housing and food for all citizens, and sustainable employment. Such details push us to focus on the manner in which Jesus’ Church participates in his messianic rule. We may not know how God means to transform the universe, but we can confess that we know it is in God’s power to do this. What remains possible for the single believer, the single congregation, is to do the work involved in such transformation by following the patterns of mercy that Christ has laid out for us. We are able to give one cold drink of water at a time. We are able to bring comfort to the poor and wretched, one act of mercy or change at a time. One book given, one friendship claimed, one covenant of love, one can of beans, one moment of commendation, one confession of God’s presence but for the asking, one moment in which another person is humanized rather than objectified, one challenge to the set order that maintains injustice, one declaration of the evil that is hiding in plain sight, one declaration that every person is a child of God: these acts accumulate...The whole of Isaiah rests on the messianic activity of God. The Church’s job is not to cloister itself proclaiming the resurrection just in the everlasting. The proclamation is for the resurrection of life in this world as well. In theological terms, it concerns realized eschatology.”

The people of Judah and the Church today are at our best when we are able to bridge the gap between what we do in worship, and then how we live in the world the other 6 days. It is making sure we don't spend so much time praying for things to happen, that we then forget to help make them happen. For example, it is important to pray for those who are cold or hungry but, then how can we help those who are cold and hungry. Jesus has left us kingdom work to do!

Sometimes when the world and its problems begin to feel insurmountable or hopeless, much like the people of Judah felt standing among the ruins of their home and temple, we need to go back to what we know. What do we know? We know that God remains faithful to humankind, (as Isaiah points out sometimes, we feel like God has left us but, when we stop to examine things, we begin to realize it is us who have left him). We know he sent his son into the world, and he lived, died, and rose again. We know that Jesus has always called his people to live justly, act compassionately and walk humbly with our Lord. We know that when Jesus lived, we would find him among the poor, the lost, the broken, the lonely, the sinners and the saints. We know he called us to love and care for one another. We know that work continues. These are the touchstones I return to when I no longer know where I am going or how to make sense of life. After reorienting ourselves around these things we can then ask ourselves "How does God continue to call us to work these things out in our own day and age and in our own lives?" How can we live justly, act compassionately and walk justly with our Lord? In the words of the late great Leonard Cohen "There is a crack in everything that's how the light gets in." Perhaps that is where we begin, look for the cracks in the world around you and help the light shine brighter as it pours into the broken and despairing places in our lives and world.