

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany  
February 9, 2020

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**Matthew 5:9-15**

**Isaiah 58, selected verses**

### **Repairers of the Breach**

*Your ruined places will be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to live in. – Isaiah 58:12*



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On the morning of September 22, 1989 our family had just returned home from Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, NC following the birth of our second daughter. Sarah's birth had been easy, and Rachel, our three-year-old was thrilled to be a big sister. My mom had arrived from Virginia. Life was good.

Baby Sarah woke at 3AM. I scooped her up and crept downstairs trying not to wake the rest of the family. That was when I heard the sound of wind and heavy rain. The front porch lamp revealed sheets of rain falling – sideways. Then I did something they tell you never to do with a newborn in the middle of the night. I flipped on the television.



That was when this image was seared in my mind forever...Hurricane Hugo. The 6:00 PM weather guy stood in front of that map -- rumpled shirt and hair. His face registered terror. I'm certain mine did too.

Hugo had already devastated the Caribbean; and we knew it would impact the east coast, but no one expected category 3 winds 100 miles inland. The weatherman reported 4 tornadoes in the area.

Minutes later the power went out. It would stay out for the next 2 ½ weeks. As we huddled together, the wind grew in intensity. Pieces of the roof began to tear away. Three-year old Rachel clung to her Nana, who had become her new best friend since the baby's arrival. Silently we waited out the night.



As daylight came the winds calmed. I stepped outside on the eve of our 6<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and saw a war zone. Fallen trees were everywhere. A live powerline sprawled across our backyard – this is not our house... it's a neighbor's... ours was in

similar shape. Pieces of our house littered the neighbors' yards and theirs in ours. Our roof was riddled with holes. My study flooded, destroying most of my beloved books.

The "Charlotte Observer" called it, "the night of fury ... Charlotte's wake-up call...It wasn't London during The Blitz" they said, "it was Charlotte after Hugo."

When I hear the prophet Isaiah promise Judah:

*Your...ruins shall be rebuilt ... you shall be called repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

This is what I remember.

Neighbors were "the light of the world" for one another at a time when there were no lights at all. No power meant we spent our evenings talking in the cul-de-sac, cooking on the gas grill with newborn baby Sarah strapped to one of us at all times.

It became the year blue tarps were dearer than gold. I do not mean to romanticize what happened; it was just what the Observer said, a grim and gritty wakeup call – but not even in the same universe as the horror that Isaiah's community faced in the years after their devastation.



Isaiah's prophetic predecessors had warned Israel and Judah for decades that something catastrophic was coming. If the people didn't get their hearts right with God...if they didn't stop thinking only of themselves and their own prosperity and pleasure...if they didn't return to following God's commandments, and cease the oppression of the poor...if they didn't begin worshiping God in sincerity, instead of worshipping to satisfy themselves, when and if they felt like it...something terrible was coming. Then catastrophe came in 587BC when Babylon's armies invaded, destroyed Jerusalem, and carried many of the people away.

In our second reading today Isaiah called all this "their rebellion" and "their sins." Chapter 58 is Isaiah's message coming to a crescendo as he spoke about returning to a devastated land after nearly 50 years in exile. This passage is long, so I'm going to read selected verses.

First, Isaiah the prophet speaks for God saying:

*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.*

The people long to know God, but there is hypocrisy, inauthenticity. They don't seek a right relationship with God and each other. They ignore God's commandments; they place their trust and loyalty in the things they own and their achievements. They fast and pray as though they were worshiping God, but it is often sham worship, because they don't come to the temple to give their lives to God; they come to get something out of it for themselves.

So Isaiah asks them about it. He asks:

*"Why do we fast [a regular part of Jewish worship] , but you do not understand?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"  
Look, you serve your own interests on my holy day,  
and oppress all your workers. ...  
You quarrel and fight. ...  
this will not make your voice heard on high.*

God wants no part of their worship wars or their partisan bickering.

*On the contrary!  
Here is the worship that pleases me:  
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?*

I love how straightforward this is! *Here is the worship that pleases me.* Again, Isaiah is speaking for God about authentic worship, true worship that is not for us, but for God! We don't need to question whether "true worship" includes traditional hymns or praise songs – because God's preference is all here in black and white. Isaiah says clearly that true worship is not about form, it's about results! True worship leads to justice and ends oppression. True worship is our marching order to feed the hungry and house the homeless, and to ask why ... why are some of us hungry and homeless? And then change the systems that have let it happen. This is our true worship, Isaiah says.

Do this, Isaiah says, and you will be the light of the world, salt of the earth, the church on the hill that cannot be hid, bringing light to the entire community. Do this and you will be peacemakers, the ones who are called, and the children of God.

*Do this, and your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your integrity shall go before you,  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
Call and the LORD will answer;  
Cry for help, and God will say, "Here I am."*

*Provided you remove from among you  
all oppression, gestures of contempt, and malicious talk.  
If you offer your own food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.*

Can we do that? Can we remove the gestures of contempt and malicious talk from among us? We are getting terrible leadership for this from Washington. Incivility was a problem in Isaiah's time, but coarseness and lack of respect have risen to a new level in our day. The prophets say there will be consequences, catastrophic ones. How we treat one another matters; it especially matters how we treat the most vulnerable.

Feed the hungry; satisfy the needs of the suffering. Isaiah says:

*Do this, and your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your sadness will become like the noonday sun.  
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 ruined places will be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairers of the breach,  
the restorers of streets to live in. [Here come the conditions]  
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,  
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;*

*Do this, and 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 the LORD has spoken.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

A breach is something that is broken, a divide or division. Hurricane Hugo breached the security of our home and community in 1989. Laws, commitments, and obligations can also be breached...so can trust. Trust is breached when one of the parties in a relationship harms or fails to honor the other.

God told Isaiah that Israel had breached God's trust with their selfishness, their refusal to keep the Sabbath, and with their treatment of the poor. If Isaiah were here, preaching to us today what would he say – to you and me?

I believe that he would say that all the rancor, *gestures of contempt, and malicious talk* – coming out of Washington, is out of control, ridiculous and dangerous.

He'd say that the church of Jesus Christ needs to be less concerned with it itself and more involved in healing our people's addiction to violence, opioids, and other drugs, and repairing the economic, racial, and class divisions among us.

He would likely say something about Creation Care, calling us to take seriously our role as stewards protecting God's masterpiece from droughts, floods, and wildfires; that Earth may again be called, *a watered garden...whose streams never fail.*

I wish I could invite Isaiah to preach a sermon from this pulpit. If I could I'd ask him to speak about kindness, justice and humble service -- some of the things our family experienced in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo. Neighbors who had previously never spoken pitched in to help one another. The self-identified racist who lived behind us, whom we greatly disliked after he told Tawes and me that our work with Habitat for Humanity was ridiculous because, in his words, "They give houses to those kind of people," meaning the working poor. After that I didn't want to look at the man. After the hurricane that same guy helped us erect a barrier around the downed power line in our yard to keep neighborhood kids safe.

There's an ancient Jewish story about a thief who in his old age was unable to steal. He was starving, so a wealthy man, hearing of his distress, sent him food.

Shortly thereafter, both the rich man and the thief died on the same day.

The rich man came before the Heavenly Court. The verdict? He was found wanting and sentenced to ... well, the bad place. At the entrance, however, an angel came hurrying to say that his sentence had been reversed. Why? The thief he helped had stolen the list of his sins.<sup>1</sup>

Now please, don't hear me say that it's okay to be a racist or a thief. Clearly it is not, but if Isaiah were to speak here, I hope he would remind us that all the judgement and the sad divisions among us, created and exaggerated every time we turn on the television or look at social media, those divisions are NOT God's intention for us! He'd say that Christians can be, must be, peacemakers, repairers of the breach, the light of the world.

Divisions can be healed, when we want unity, and when we listen, truly listen to one another; and make God's word, not fear, the basis of our decisions.

If Isaiah were to speak here he would tell us to be bold. Isaiah wants us up off our knees and onto our feet, helping to repair the breach. Woods ministries do – not just on the Sabbath, but every day. There are so many ministries here I can't name them all. Here's one: Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is planning a breach repairing trip at the end of March to help with flood recovery in eastern North Carolina following the 2019 storms. If you are able, you should go along.

When you do, or when you pray for the volunteers, or make a donation to Woods to help cover the cost of transportation and supplies -- when you do you will be called repairers of the breach. You will be called the peacemakers, healers of the division, the light of the world.

*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 .*

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Karp, *The Jewish Way of Life and Thought*, KTAV Publishing, 1981, 177.