

Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Epiphany: Isaiah 58:1-12
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Today's reading from Isaiah 58 is on my shortlist for favorite chapters in the whole bible. I love Isaiah's vision of the kingdom of God on earth,--with earth, this time, being a place of justice and peace, a place where God's presence draws near and permeates all things--this vision can literally bring tears to my eyes.

Listen to these words again, this vision: *"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."*

What's so beautiful to me is the idea of restoration--of what is broken being made whole, of what is unjust being made right.

The trouble with that vision is that it feels so removed from the world we live in, so removed that I don't even know if it resonates with us anymore. I tried this week to come up with some cultural references that depict this type of restoration, and I could only come up with a few lines here and there from songs. I thought of the Mumford and Sons line "There will come a time, you'll see, with no more tears." And Paul Simon's "We have reason to believe that we all will be received in Graceland."

But aside from a handful of contemporary examples, what I see around us is despair and hopelessness--and good reason to feel this way.

Take climate change as an example. If you talk to me about climate change, I am a complete downer. I am without hope on this one. In fact, I used to teach a class called Spirituality and the Environment, which I taught three separate times, but I refused to teach it more often than once every two years because it was so emotionally hard on me. I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling this way.

I use climate change as an example here, but there are countless others: seemingly endless shootings in schools and places of worship, a rising number of displaced migrants and refugees with nowhere to go, an upswing in economic inequality and institutionalized racial and religious prejudice. How on earth will we make it through these things?

The enormity of the problems that we see around us and our collective inability to solve them is immense--to the point where we don't even seem to have the will to try to solve them anymore. This type of hopelessness breeds apathy. We even have a term for it now: compassion fatigue. We check out and disengage to protect ourselves. For example, I used to follow the news carefully. Now I check in once a day to keep myself from being overwhelmed. I used to listen to NPR in the car, now I listen to garbage pop stations, because at least Lizzo and Billie Eilish don't cause me anxiety!

In short, I think the problem is this: We live in a world where hope seems impossible--and we act like it.

This issue of hope and hopelessness brings to mind something that the psychologist Brene Brown said in a talk, that surprised me. She had started researching hope, expecting to

find that hope is a feeling, but that's not what she found at all. Instead she found that hope is a "*cognitive, behavioral process that we learn when we experience adversity.*"

Hope is not a way of feeling; hope is a way of thinking and acting in the face of difficulty. She goes on to say that hope is hard work and that it's something that we learn from others.

According to Brown, this process (that is, living with hope) assumes a background of adversity (we have that!) and requires three things: "goals, pathways, and agency." To think and act in hope, we need to set realistic and meaningful goals, we have to figure out a flexible plan for achieving them, and we have to have confidence that we can effect change.

I find this research on hope to be helpful in thinking through how I can reorient myself towards hope, but (more than anything) what I want us to hear today (and me more than anyone) is that hope is not something we feel. Hope is something we do, something we have to work at, something we do with others. It is something we exercise in the face of despair.

So how do we move from hopelessness to hope? What does hope as a way of thinking and acting in the world look like? And what does it look like, in particular, under conditions of adversity?

This is where we, as people of God, can turn back to God's dream for his kingdom on earth, which is described so beautifully at the end of Isaiah.

We see here that living as God's people is a lifestyle, a way of being in the world, with profound social and societal implications. It is living as people of hope.

Living as the people of God, as a people of hope, is not *just* religion. It's not *just* belief. This idea of religion as *just* something we believe or *just* something we practice is a common misconception of religious faith, and you can hear the Israelites falling into this trap in Isaiah—just as we do, all the time.

God says in Isaiah: "*Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a [people] that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God.*"

Or to rephrase, you talk like you want to be part of my kingdom, but you don't act like it.

Functioning with this dichotomy between belief and practice is something that the ancient Israelites are faulted for in Isaiah. And we fall for this dichotomy just as often.

You might be surprised to know that this isn't entirely our fault. Here's why: there's only one word for justice and righteousness in Biblical Greek. However, most English translations of the bible choose to translate this word as "righteousness" instead of as "justice"--though the word refers to both concepts, together. As a result of these translations, we think that the Christian bible has a lot to say about righteousness, but not much to say about justice--but this is a false dichotomy. In English we think of these two words as completely different concepts, which means we probably need to seriously rethink how we hear these words--trying instead to hold together righteousness and justice in our minds, because in truth they're the same thing.

This is exactly the point that's being made in Isaiah: "*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?*" Isaiah takes a personal, religious practice (fasting) and makes it very clear that fasting must have interpersonal, social significance.

According to Isaiah, if we were to act in hope, if we were to live lives characterized by justice/righteousness, we would share our bread with the hungry. We would bring the homeless into our house. We would clothe the naked. We would truly see and honor the people around us.

Imagine if we did this for just a minute. What would it look like if we as God's people acted with hope?

If we did this, we would be thinking and acting like people already living in God's kingdom--people who are ready to live in God's kingdom.

Because, in God's kingdom, the bonds of injustice are loosed. In God's kingdom, the oppressed go free. In God's kingdom, the needs of the afflicted are satisfied.

And God's people, the people of hope, live like this now.

This seems to me, and probably to you as well, like an impossibly beautiful ideal, and yet it does happen--though admittedly not as often as it should. There are people living in the world today as if they were living in the kingdom of God. (This might be why we call them saints.)

I'll give you an example that I encountered just this week: I got my hair cut on Tuesday by a man, Michael, that I had just happened to find online--I made an appointment because he had good reviews--that was the only reason I ended up in that particular salon with this particular person.

I showed up for the haircut, and we were chatting along, like you do, and it's not until about half way through the haircut, that he told me that, in addition to owning the salon, he also runs a hospice. I was, as you can imagine, pretty floored by this and started asking him more about himself and the hospice. I came to find out that this man and his partner have been running this hospice since 1992 and that it was originally started to serve people dying from AIDS.

As I learned more, I found out that his hospice is in fact a Catholic Worker house called "Friends of Dorothy" (after both Dorothy Day, that modern saint of hospitality, and, of course, Dorothy and her ruby slippers). I found out that these amazing acts of hospitality were inspired by Michael's desire to live out God's kingdom on earth.

Needless to say, I left the haircut energized to have found this little sliver of the Kingdom of God, just a few miles from my house and completely unbeknownst to me.

The call to live into the kingdom of God is central to Christian practice and to our identity as people of God, but frankly it still feels pretty unattainable. The good news here is that, as Brene Brown would say, hope is something that we learn in the face of adversity. Hope is born of struggle.

Perhaps then we can take our despair and together with a goal, a plan, and some agency, we might consider what we can do today, this week, this year to become people who live in hope, who think and act like God's kingdom is possible, even here, even now, in our messed up world. *Amen.*