

August 11, 2019
Rev. Kerry Smith

Isaiah 1:16-20
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Backpack Impact

Isaiah 1:16-20

New Revised Standard Version

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

It is back to school time and all the parents said Amen! And all the teachers said No! I am excited about the routine with structure that the school year brings. Today I brought a backpack with me so that I can get ready for the new school year. I love new beginnings. I love opportunities to start over. I love New Year's resolutions and the beginning of the school year. I love the idea that I can begin again, I can be different, I can be better. I have packed some things in my backpack that can help me remember about the impact that I can make in this new beginning. Things that help me remember who I am and whose I am. Things that help me remember that I am God's beloved child and that I am loved by God.

This is my journal. I write in here Bible verses or words that inspire me. One of the verses in my journal is this verse from Isaiah. It is the lectionary passage for today and it is the introduction to Isaiah's message. Isaiah was a prophet and like a prophet his words were about all the many ways that the people had messed up, how judgement was certain, and how important it was for the people to change their ways. Isaiah didn't want people to just feel bad about the way that they had been treating one another. He didn't just want thoughts and prayers. Later in Isaiah, the prophet will say, "These people draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13). Isaiah wanted real change. He wanted people to have a complete turn around in their thinking and in their actions.

Isaiah was talking to people individually, but Isaiah was also talking to communities and to the nation as a whole. Isaiah wanted to expose the false gods and keep the message focused on what God is doing. Isaiah was writing in about 701 B.C.E. when Israel is barely holding on. People thought that God was pleased with them because they were doing so well, as if their wealth meant that God was pleased with them and not others. This idea that I made it, they didn't, God has sure been good to me is one that we need to be wary of. It's like when we go on a mission trip and we think that we are bringing God with us, we are going to rescue the people who live in poverty. But, God has been with those people just as much as God is with us. We aren't better, we aren't loved by God more, we aren't blessed more. As the song reminds us, God loves the little children, all the children of the world.

Isaiah is angry about the people's unjust acts. Isaiah says that God wants people to open their eyes, lift up their heads, get up, and go and do something to make the world better.¹ To share God's love with other people. We get in this cycle where we get sad over the news, ask God to comfort us, and then do nothing to try and change the world. That is not what God wants. "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

I want to make an impact in our world. St Augustine said "hope has two beautiful daughters. Anger at the way things are, and courage to see to it that they don't remain the way

¹<http://revjameshowell.blogspot.com/2016/07/its-time-for-end-to-our-prayers.html>

they are.”² I taught the Bible rotation this week at VBS and each day we had a different theme: Life is unfair, but God is good. Life is sad, but God is good. Life has changes, but God is good. Life is scary, but God is good. It filled my heart to hear the faith of the kids as they shared stories about when their heart hurt and how they knew that in the hurt God was with them. Audrey Hale shared that she is scared about the oceans and people using straws but picking up litter and recycling makes her feel that God is with her and she can make a difference!

It feels like on some of the issues in our world, we have two choices. We can stay silent or yell into an already overwhelming cacophony of other people’s voices.³ We might be feeling like we have lost faith, lost community, lost family. These words from Isaiah remind me that there are people who want to journey peacefully together. We are all humans. We matter. We do have influence over our future. We can make an impact. We gather together today to remind us that no matter what we lost, what grief we bear, how many times we are rejected, we are not alone. Hope is a light that shines through the darkness. To me that hope looks like a decision with great courage to do something. To listen, to build trust, to insist on equal treatment before the law. We change our attitude and we do the work of justice by care for the powerless members of our society, the oppressed, the orphan and the widow.

My heart breaks today for the sons and daughters, husbands and wives whose parents and spouses went to work in Mississippi, but did not return home. Two thousand children left abandoned with gyms, schools, and churches helping to care for the children.⁴ What we are doing now most clearly isn’t working. Our political process is embarrassing. Fear is killing us from the inside, but we can stand up to our fears, expose them and find ways to build a world that knows higher pursuits than security.

We can create a safer society. We can turn off any TV show where a gun is fired. We can resource our schools more equitably. We can elect different people. We can pass some gun law, any gun law. We can connect with people who are different instead of judging them. We can enthusiastically support our police and rebuilt trust with them, but only if we are willing to hold the small minority of police who exceed their authority accountable.⁵ We can be different.

The prophet Isaiah sees the rich and comfortable parade into the temple with their fine clothes, their well-educated priests, their clean and pure sacrifices. The people in the pews are only those who belong, not the riff-raff of the neighborhood. The comfortable worshippers would rather sit through beautiful worship than open their eyes to the injustices that surround them. Their worship has gotten in the way of what God has called them to be and do. The prophet Isaiah looks below the surface of things, and finds corruption and indifference.

God wants the people to put away their evil deeds. God wants them to “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” Isaiah says God prefers justice to our sacrifices. Our sins can be like snow and washed away if we are willing to obey God’s vision for humanity. It is a vision of justice, mercy, compassion. Isaiah calls out people who think there is no connection between their belief and the way that they relate to their neighbors. You know who I mean. The Christians who protest abortion but have no interest in adopting. The Christians who love Jesus but hate God’s people if they are a certain color or a certain sexual orientation. Jesus welcomed the refugee and fed the hungry. We are called to walk in obedience to the God who demands justice.

² Quoted by Rev. James Howell here: <http://revjameshowell.blogspot.com/2016/07/its-time-for-end-to-our-prayers.html>

³ https://rachelheldevans.com/campaigns/view-campaign/OVahMR7wNVIOCvnb6Rxl70ieBIJ-7BtpwWatUZsK1AF0GzjJfS1_32tR5f8cMyQN3te9e7lbtLAgIM2wrhJxz2UIu6RqeHje

⁴ <https://twitter.com/bishopminerva/status/1159297466229039105>

⁵ Much of this paragraph from <http://revjameshowell.blogspot.com/2016/07/its-time-for-end-to-our-prayers.html>

I am sad. I am sad about America, I am sad about gun violence, about children separated from their parents at the border and at ICE raids, I am sad about the United Methodist Church and its homophobic stance. I am sad but I don't want to become numb to the injustice. I want to dwell in the midst of it. I want to be present to the pain of the world. I want to have courage to remain soft in this hard world.

It is from God that we learn to hunger for justice. When we lose sight of hope, may that taste of God's hope for the world stay with us. May God sustain us in our work of creating a world free from violence, free from toxic masculinity and white supremacy, free from the fear of entering a church or school or mosque or music festival or Walmart or wherever we turn for relaxation and refuge.

In her book *Accidental Saints* Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "This is the life we get here on earth. We get to give away what we receive. We get to believe in each other. We get to forgive and be forgiven. We get to love imperfectly. And we never know what effect it will have for years to come. And all of it ... all of it is completely worth it." I am so grateful for this community of Greenland Hills. Thanks be to God, Amen.