

Sermon March 20, 2022 3rd Sunday of Lent
Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE:

Luke 13:6-9:

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Isaiah 55:1-9:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

SERMON: “Come, See, Seek, Return” The Rev. Brent Damrow

Hearing this passage from Isaiah read this morning and coming to life for us, reminded me of a journey that I have taken with this passage. The title you see in your bulletin does not really have anything to do with what I’m going to say. My original thought was captivated by that beautiful imagery in the beginning, that imagery of feasting and being fed, of why do we spend our time and our money and our resources and who we are on those things that we know not only don’t bring life, but painfully in these last few weeks that have rained down death in Ukraine, why do we spend time and money, and eat and drink those things that may give us escape for the moment, and yet aren’t sustainable for the long run. And yet we do.

But more and more as I read this passage, the more those two lines at the end of this reading just wouldn’t let me go. Those phrases that say “my thoughts are not your thoughts,” says God. “Your ways are not my ways,” says God.

As people of faith, we hold on to this fundamental truth that human beings, all human beings, are the stuff of beauty. They’re the stuff of worth. They are beloved. They are made in God’s very

image. We are animated by nothing short of the Spirit of God. Each and every person represents a different facet of God's beauty, building together the Body of Christ, and the mosaic of life. As people of faith, while we sometimes get caught up in our sin, our faith fundamentally actually proclaims how amazing each of you are, and how amazing humanity is together. God indwells us. Human beings are amazing creatures. We are fully capable. We are fully complicated. And yet in these past few weeks, both by what we see on our TVs and what we don't see on our TVs, we are reminded in stark terms that our ways are not always God's ways.

As people, we have the potential to create beautiful things. Shut your eyes and think of Beethoven's 9th Symphony for a moment. We are capable of building places to come hear music where the sound is perfect and the imagery is evocative. And yet we are also aware that, despite the fact that painted in big letters outside proclaiming that there were *children* inside one of those facilities bombed in Ukraine, humans are also capable of blowing it all up.

We have learned over history that together we have the will to break down seemingly insurmountable barriers. We have flown and landed on the moon. We have telescopes that allow us to see beyond anything we even knew existed. We are going now to the very depths of the ocean. And yet as human beings, we sometimes lack that same will, that same passion, that same drive, that same commitment to break down barriers that we see all around us, barriers of racial injustice, food insecurity, the lack of living wages, or the inexcusable reality that there is not health care for all. We have discovered amazing power, power to build buildings that dwarf the Tower of Babel, power to destroy the world multiple times over. And yet while we have the power, we have not fully unleashed it on actually *saving* creation.

"My ways are not your ways," God says. And how true we feel that can be in this moment, with war, climate, pandemic, and so much more on our hearts. And while I could not shake that phrase, "my ways are not your ways," we also can't forget what Margot reminded us of this morning. We can't forget the purple of Lent – my purple stole, and my purple socks, for goodness sake – we are in Lent. And in Lent, no matter what the barriers, we remember that God turned to us, that God sent God's own self wrapped in flesh, fully divine, fully human. Not just that we might imagine the way, but that we might touch it. That we might feel it. That we might follow it. That we might gather at this communion table with God's way, that God's way may yet, and even now with the next breath, actually, really, truly *be* our way.

I have to mention that our attention and our love and our kindness are rightly turned to the people in Ukraine. And that the images that we see there are shattering. I also want to point out that there is an equally devastating campaign that's been going on for years in Uganda, that we haven't found the courage quite yet to look in the eye. That this idea of brokenness is out there. But in this case in Ukraine, we have gotten to see firsthand photos of destruction. Strollers parked to remember the dead. Images of cities that were beautiful that are now lying in ruins. And in this particular conflict, maybe from years of history, from years of conflict, it's hard not to see evil on the move. It is hard not to see oppression lurking in the shadows.

But the question that comes up for the people in Isaiah's time, the question that comes up for us here in Stockbridge, is so what? What are we called to do? How is it that we make God's way our way in this moment?

In addition to the joy of seeing you all here in person in the sanctuary, I'm excited, because do you know what I'm going to do after worship today? I'm going to a meeting of people who are considering becoming part of this church family. New members who have somehow found us in the midst of these past years. It is that moment where we remake ourselves as a brand new church, a brand new body, where we welcome in their gifts and their perspectives. We don't force them to take ours. And when they stand up here in the front of the sanctuary, the way they join is through the claiming of covenant. And there is a central question that is asked of those new members: "Do you promise, by the grace of God, to continue in your pilgrimage of faith, to be Christ's disciple, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best as you are able?"

I love when we take in new members. In part because it makes us new. And in part because it gets us to remember the things that sometimes we take for granted. Like that our calling is not just when those images are on TV. But also to *always* resist evil and oppression. To always show love and justice, and to always witness to – which means to actually live into the work and word of Jesus Christ. It isn't just that we ask new people to say are you up to that. We all claim again that we remember this is our calling. And then this venerable institution, this old sturdy vessel of becoming, well, it becomes new again. We bring our different experiences together to make them one, to share the road, to carry the load for our time, to try and become people who walk in God's ways.

We try to come from the various experiences we've had, and try to claim a shared life together, just like the people that Isaiah was talking to in our Scripture today. You see, some of them had suffered the oppression of occupation, being left behind in the exile. Most of those were people who didn't have overt talents or who didn't have overt wealth. They were left behind. Others were trying to suffer and come back home through the trauma of displacement, being carried off to another place to serve another land. And as they came back together, they tried to find a common way through an uncommon time. And I know this will shock you, because it never happens in our church! But in that church, they disagreed. Go figure. Each of them bringing the authenticity of their experience which came in tension with the authenticity of another, all of them pursuing things in the moment that felt good but didn't necessarily lead to a path forward. And again, none of us can relate to that! Among them was plenty of righteous indignation when others' experiences led to different conclusions or outcomes or rules or ways they thought they should be.

And so the people in Isaiah's time were trying to knit themselves back together. But to listen to Isaiah, to listen to this passage, is to remember what God says. It is, in some ways, up to what we do. But really, it's just getting in line with what God is already doing. Because, you see, God says my word that I send out, it is not going to come back empty. My word that I preach to you, my word - that in Lent, remember, as Jesus - is not going to come back having not accomplished that which I sent it for. And if we remember John 3:16,17, why did God send Jesus to the world? Because God so loved the world. And to accomplish what? To save the *whole* world. That the *whole* world – the occupiers and the occupied, the fighters and the victims, the Russians and the Ukrainians – that *all* of us might be saved.

Central to our purpose in Lent, and the reason we take this journey with Jesus, is nothing short of making our ways *into* God's ways. Jesus, after all, in Matthew's gospel (in Matthew's gospel, by the way, Jesus didn't talk about a gardener who helped the fig tree grow; Jesus cursed the fig tree!) – I'm thankful to be in Luke for our gospel this year, but in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says this: All of you, all of us, are called to be perfect as God is perfect. But before you freak out, I think there is actually a way to understand that. Because it's not meant to be some lofty aspiration, but to pursue with the same dogged pursuit Beethoven did writing that symphony, or humanity demonstrated getting to the moon, it's not an abstraction but a way of life.

So in these moments of war, turmoil and suffering, what does that look like? Well, I'm deeply thankful to Jeremy for part of the answer to this. Yesterday I was in the memorial garden clearing leaves, tending to the stones that hold precious memories, honoring and remembering the people I love in that garden, either because I knew them or I heard wonderful stories about them. And Jeremy sent me a clip from one of my theological mentors, Miroslav Volf. One thing you need to know about Miroslav Volf is he grew up in war-torn Yugoslavia. When he wrote his book "Exclusion & Embrace," about loving the enemy, what he writes about how we are called to be people of love, this isn't him preaching to the people who haven't suffered. This is him remembering his own life, and yet finding God's ways in the midst of all of it. There is something that he said that we need to hear this morning, that we do whisper in our prayers. And I wonder if we're letting it deeper into our hearts. And that is this, that the only thing we can do if it's going to be God's way, is it has to be love. And love for all. Love for everyone. That if we're going to align ourselves with God, it must be drenched and overflowing in love, because everyone needs it, the oppressed and the oppressor, the violated and the violator.

Volf is quick to point out that the gift of liberation theology and other places remind us that God has a preferential love. I know that sounds hard. But it means a love that goes above and beyond the perfect love God shares with everyone. That God is even now actively loving those who are in harm's way in ways that we can only imagine.

There are psalms of anger, there are psalms of retribution, there are psalms of vengeance, that say "God, do something to them." There is even one that says take the babies and dash them on rocks. But they are meant to be lifted up in a place like this where we remember that it is God who in the end will do the judging. It is God who will exercise God's idea of justice and love. Fortunately, not our ideas.

So the first thing I want you to remember as you go about your work in standing against evil and resisting oppression, which is our calling, is to make sure that if you're not starting in love, then start over. And the other piece in our Isaiah passage today is about God never quitting. God makes a covenant that lasts. That covenant with David, that covenant that was made through Jesus. It lasts no matter what we do. God holds true.

And following this passage will be some incredibly important words. God speaks a word, Isaiah says, that will achieve its purpose. When God talks, the word goes out and it does not come back empty-handed. A word, God says, will succeed in the thing for which I sent it, which if we remember, the purpose is to save the whole world. How can we not hear Jesus in Lent and

remember that our goal is nothing short of persisting, to bear the worst of evil days, to make it through always testifying, and only to love.

In Isaiah, and in the gospel of Luke, God is always doing things and making things happen with or without us. But in both holy books is the assumption that we are going to get on board and do something too. How will we respond? It is a book about how when we finally are convinced that things are beyond us, when we finally are willing to let go of our ways, because clearly they don't completely work, and instead settle for God's ways, we can only choose love. We can only dedicate ourselves to tirelessly pursuing goodness, mercy, justice, hope, until all, really *all*, find wholeness.

These are challenging times, but maybe the beauty is that they are challenging enough that we dare not convince ourselves we are up to it on our own. And remember the truth that God is. And all we have to do is get on board and get moving.

Following even further in this chapter of Isaiah is the stuff you hear at weddings, often in the benediction. "You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace," Isaiah proclaims. That is God's word for us. Amen? When you walk outside, those hills, you know what they're going to do? They're going to burst into song, if you listen. Amen? And those trees, when they finally get leaves back on them, and maybe even before, you know what they're going to do? They are going to clap their hands.

God's ways are not our ways. God's truth is not our truth. And yet, you know what Jesus says? Come. Come and see! Amen!