

**THE POWER OF PRESENCE; ISA. 58:1-9a, 1COR. 2:1-12, MATT. 5:13-18; 2-5-17;
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When our Jewish/Christian study group sat outside the Church of the Beatitudes last month, on a sloping hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee – a church built on the alleged location where Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount from which today’s Gospel lesson is taken –

Rev. Bill Hennessy and I said that that exact spot was likely *not* where Jesus preached his famous sermon – since there is no way of knowing – but, we said, that it was as representative a location as any because it was on the side of the lake where we know Jesus traveled and preached.

We also said this portrayal of Jesus interpreting the Law on a mountainside was intended by Matthew to look like and remind his Jewish congregation of Moses who received and delivered the Law from Mt. Sinai. Invoking beloved leaders of the past gives people comfort, especially if the one invoking is new and unknown. Then Jesus’ reassures everyone: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

I start here today because the lesson from Isaiah and Matthew go hand in hand; they are part and parcel of each other and acknowledge the deep Jewish roots of our Christian faith. Prophet and Gospel writer both call for more faithful observance of the Law than the people they were talking to were in the habit of giving.

In Isaiah’s time Israel enjoyed the comforts of prosperity and the predictability of settled, civilized life. Unlike the days when their ancestors wandered the wilderness and learned to depend upon the providence of God, now, with their exodus from slavery in Egypt long behind them, the safety and stability of settled life lulled them into relying only on themselves. Their food production, their success in the marketplace and trade routes provided a sustainable and prosperous existence but they took no account of those who struggled in poverty.

The faith that ushered them from slavery to freedom and had blossomed into a robust garden of spiritual confidence and trust now, in their self-reliant, self-indulgent living had shriveled into a few dried up, unctuous rituals like fasting and wearing sackcloth and ashes. Nothing in these rituals relieved their concern about their aggressive superpower neighbor to the north: Babylon; nor did they raise awareness about the plight of the poor and suffering in their midst.

The people complained that their worship of God did not give them the results they wanted, nor did it make them happy. In Jesus’ time, too, practice of the faith had become, at least for the authorities, a boilerplate of empty words and rituals.

God’s people in both cases had drifted from their moorings and found themselves going through the motions of an empty religion, oblivious to injustice.

The old saying ‘the more things change the more they stay the same’ applies. From Isaiah’s day six centuries before Jesus to Matthew’s time to the 21st century the circumstances are much the same.

The past two weeks have generated a collective sense of social and political unease. I have heard some people ask if the uncertainty injected into global politics and world affairs by the new White House as well as an economy, which former Secretary of the Treasury Larry Summers said last week was on a sugar high – as virtually all economies are when a populist leader is elected, I have heard some ask if the times will cause more people to come to church.

If it does then well and good. But what they and we find here today at church are texts like these from Isaiah and Matthew. Texts that offer no quick fix, no easy remedy, but call us back to more faithful obedience to the Law.

Today's portion of the Sermon on the Mount precedes the readings for next week – a continuation of the Sermon in which Jesus reinterprets the Ten Commandments for his disciples. Murder? If you wish ill upon a person are you not murdering them? Adultery? If you have lustful thoughts are you not committing adultery?

The point is the law is not meant for external appearance but for internal change and transformation. When Isaiah calls for higher obedience to the Law, and Jesus says he came to fulfill the Law, they both are talking about living by the spirit of the Law; not going through the motions of a worship service or running through a morning prayer and then returning to the rat race, unchanged, unmoved.

Isaiah excises this thinking with the precision of a neurosurgeon. "Is this the fast that I have chosen – only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?"

Rather, "this is the fast that I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke. Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the wanderer (i.e. immigrant) with shelter; when you see the naked to clothe him and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth and your healing will appear."

Isaiah puts an end to the notion that we can worship God and continue unchanged to live lives of privilege and comfort. Rather, real worship, Isaiah says, means translating what we say and sing about here in this exalted sanctuary to the streets outside these walls; real worship, God's worship and fasting leads to the breaking of the yokes of oppression – Isaiah's metaphor for the "power arrangements" of society.

Look no further for Isaiah's 'yokes of oppression' than the near monopolistic power of big business that lobbies for policies that favor their growth at the expense of small businesses and working people; or e.g., Friday's executive order to repeal, for Mr. Trump's business-owner friends, the law designed to prevent unbridled greed, fiscal collapse and protect small investors.

When we bring relief for the poor then, says Isaiah, your light shall break forth and your healing will appear. He does not get more specific but promises those who tutor immigrant children, who help new entrepreneurs start micro-businesses, who volunteer in soup kitchens and write to legislators about health insurance, parental leave and living wages, for them, healing is a by-product of giving help and hope.

This summons to higher obedience to the Law that connects us to our own 'flesh and blood' as Isaiah says, that is, our neighbors with whom we rarely interact but who live here, work here, send their children to school here, yet who live in poverty or near poverty (which includes over a third of the children in this city);

or those who had jobs in the old smoke stack industries but now can't find work or who cobble together several part time jobs with no benefits, in a day when automation and outsourced manufacturing to cheaper labor in other nations has reduced the power of unions and left the traditional "American worker" struggling to scrape by;

this summons to a religious faith and practice that links us to the realities of everyday life for our neighbors who feel like the deck is stacked against them, or the system is rigged by those in power, this call to such a faith comes at exactly the right time.

We should not fail to criticize the new president where rights and freedoms are in danger, but that's not enough. Yes, we must remain vigilant and watchful to protect and preserve the core values of our faith that are under attack. But if that's all we do our light will remain under a bushel and our salt will lose its flavor.

We are living in the age of 'the battle of narratives' – a divided body politic not unlike the church in Corinth. The conservative narrative says big government threatens our productivity and viability as a nation; the liberal narrative says unregulated business will exploit and abuse people and widen the gap between the have and have-nots; the nativist narrative with the white supremacist twist says the pure folk who embody the pure soul of the nation live in the heartland and are of northern European heritage, and higher on the ladder of human progress and privilege; the narrative of the traditional American myth that says we are a nation of immigrants, welcoming to all, benefitting by all, giving all hope and opportunity.

The deep disparagement among Americans today is reflected in these diverse narratives that we adopt as our stories. These are powerful myths, they capture how we see our lives connected to universal and sacred truths. Yet, the narratives and myths that appear to be winning are those, driven by fear, that would build walls, stay put and dwell in nostalgia rather than live into the future.

Did you notice who Jesus is speaking to this morning? They are those who mourn, who are meek, and long for peace; they've been persecuted for believing and doing the right thing, for showing mercy and kindness and for being pure in heart?

Many of us would be at home in their shoes. Several of you told me last week that you feel battered by the politics of the day. Important people in high places are making decisions that are making life scary and difficult.

So what does Jesus do? He doesn't lower the bar, he raises it. He says you and I are needed now more than ever to bring the life giving zest of hope and to push back the darkness in others' lives. Yes, he needs a prophetic voice against abusive leaders but he also needs the power of our presence where people are hurting.

This is the hallmark of God's people in every age and culture. How do we get through these times? Or more accurately, what does God call us to do in these times? Loose the yokes of oppression, says Isaiah; be salt and light, says Jesus.

This past week a member of this congregation who lives near the mosque of the Muslim Society of the Niagara Frontier in Amherst took a bouquet of flowers to them after she heard the news of the shooting deaths by a Canadian nationalist extremist in Quebec City of four Muslims at prayer.

The women at the mosque were profoundly moved; the flowers were a sign of concern and healing in a time of great and dangerous discrimination. They invited our church member to bring her friends back to the mosque to share a meal together; a meal that they would prepare as a gesture of friendship and solidarity.

You never know where the Spirit will lead when you let it loose in your life – the spirit of kindness and reconciliation, the spirit of peace and mercy.

Jesus, says those whose lives are transformed by the spirit of the Law will be the builders of a new world; a world of unexpected and unheard of reconciliation; a world of simple truth-telling and speaking truth to power; and a world of outrageous generosity.

I said a few weeks ago that these times call for vigilance and watchfulness; I want to add to that remembering that we are salt and light in a tasteless and dark time.

Beneath the rancor, disparagement and competing narratives are real people, our own 'flesh and blood.'

Maybe there's someone hurting somewhere you can take flowers to this week. Amen.