

Sermon
Delivered at Plymouth United Church of Christ
Eau Claire, WI
© Rev. David J. Huber, January 9, 2011

Focus scripture: Isaiah and Matthew lectionary texts

The primary task of we who dare to step behind a pulpit and pretend we have anything valuable to say is to preach the Good News – and to search for and identify and point within our culture or community and say, “God is there!” or “Jesus is at work here” or “That is the Holy Spirit!” But sometimes it’s awfully difficult— it feels more like all we’re doing fixing your car by turning up the radio to mask the sound.

We’re nine days into the new year and already we had a school shooting in Omaha, the shooting of a congresswoman, a federal judge, a child and others yesterday, Australia is flooding, California is mudsliding, the east coast is covered in snow, birds are falling from the sky, fish are washing up on shore, not to mention the murders, starvations, imprisonments, gang violence, and drug problems that we don’t hear about. [loudly] God is good!

[Pause] Those don’t seem to go very well together, do they? Those wise men who visited Jesus a couple days ago, I wonder if they’re thinking to themselves, “Really? This was your plan? We traveled thousands of miles so you could do this?”

BUT, I do believe God is good. God cannot be anything else and one reason we say it so much is so that it’s easier to say in the dark times when it’s tempting not to say it, or tempting to disagree with it. Just like why it’s so important to say, “I love you” to your spouse or children as often as possible, so you remember it when they aren’t being very lovable. And because you never know when it’s going to be the last one.

We’re in dark times—sure. There have always been dark times.

But never a time that was only dark – it only takes a candle to dispel the darkness in a room. And probably never a time that was only light, except perhaps the Garden of Eden, but even that held the shadow of sin and temptation.

For families of the killed – grief and darkness. For the families of those who escaped – joy and light. For the rest of us, a gray miasma of defeat and impotence before senseless violence and unrepentant hate.

Isaiah's time was dark. Israel conquered, the temple looted and then destroyed down to the last brick, people in exile. In that dark time Isaiah had the task of preaching Good News, and he gave it. He pointed to God, and told the people, "Remember." Remember who you are, and remember who God was and is and will be. God promised Abraham, rescued from Egypt, brought into the Promised Land. God is love and we will be redeemed. We will be brought out of the darkness. God, through Jesus, is the light that dispels the darkness...

Isaiah's words have been running through my head since yesterday's shootings. A friend posted on her Facebook page yesterday, "Gotta kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds light." It's funny, and sometimes it could be true, and definitely feels true at times. But it's such a violent thought. Instead of kicking the darkness to bleed light, Isaiah talked of being the light. Don't go to battle with the darkness, because it can't be touched. But we can make it impossible for it to exist by radiating God's light.

Isaiah also was charged with bringing the Good News at a time of darkness. "It will end" he told his people. And Jesus came.

Jesus could have fought the darkness of the Roman Empire. That's what many wanted him to do, and what many thought the Messiah would do. But I think he knew the futility of that, and his mission was clearly to teach us a way opposite of that. He could have fought the darkness of the Roman Empire, but instead he brought light: he healed, he taught, he fed people, he loved. He used healing and hopeful words, a language of radiant generosity.

And I've been thinking of Isaiah's corrective to the language of darkness. We've heard so much vitriol and violent language in our political and social discourse, in school bullying, in letters to the editor, on TV and in talk radio. It's not servant-style language. The vitriol is high, there's been more of violent imagery, divisive, loud, clanging "us and them" language, words of hurt, people claiming God is on their side – and that, therefore, God is NOT on the other side, so therefore they are evil or so morally bad that they can be dehumanized or meet a violent end.

But on this 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War, let us remember that servant language asks, as did Abraham Lincoln, not "is God on my side", but "Am I on God's side?" Am I bringing light, or are darkness and I kicking the light until it is quenched to darkness?

I believe how we use language is just as critical to our faith journey as how we live. I'm always interested to see how people use words, how they speak of times of tragedy as well as joy, especially words of our politicians, thinkers, media heads, and other public figures. Sheriff Clarence Dupnik, reminded us so beautifully yesterday that not all attacks are physical: "When you look at unbalanced people, how they respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths about tearing down the government. The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous. And, unfortunately, Arizona I think has become sort of the capital. We have become the Mecca for prejudice and bigotry. It's not unusual for all public officials to get threats constantly, myself included. And that's the sad thing of what's going on in America. Pretty soon, we're not going to be able to find reasonable, decent people who are willing to subject themselves to serve in public office." [from the Huffington Post, January 8, 2011] "Let me just say one thing, because people tend to poo-poo this business about all the vitriol that we hear inflaming the American public by people who make a living off doing that. That may be free speech. *But it's not without consequences.*" [emphasis mine; this is my own transcript from one his press conferences on January 8, 2011]

Jesus said that it's not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but

what comes out. And while it's a lot more fun to be nasty... as my friend and UCC minister here in the Wisconsin Conference, Rev. Don Niederfrank said yesterday in response to one of my posts on facebook, "It's so much more exciting being John the Baptist, knowing for certain who the bad people are, declaring words of God's judgement, wrapping ourselves in the mantel of righteous anger because the other way, the way that sees no "other," the way of gentle, unrelenting compassion is so damn hard."

But that's what we're asked to do and on our good days we do it: our St. Francis Food Pantry giving, our quilts, our prayers. I firmly believe there is way more light within our world than there is darkness; it's just that dark has a P.A. system and an advertising budget. And it's so very tempting to join in with whoever is loudest. But the Good News says we don't have to live in the dark, and neither does anyone else, because we live in the age of grace and the resurrection of Easter.

So let's tone it down.

Jesus doesn't ask for volume.

We're not Spinal Tap; we don't need to be at 11 all the time.

Isaiah says: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice ... I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness ... See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare."

That's the guy that I follow: not a loud, clanging, banging brash server of darkness bloated on self-importance and a superiority complex that looks at all of life as a win-lose battle, but a quiet wick-nonquenching, prisoner-releasing, sight-restoring bringer-of-light who came to us quietly one night

noticed only by shepherds and wise men from far away, who became a political refugee, was baptized by John, and then showed up in a synagogue after 40 days of being tempted by Satan in the desert to read a very similar Isaiah passage and say “That’s me” and begin a ministry that was just that, and he asks us to follow.

We have this painting hanging up here that our children made last year that says “Precious lord, take my hand”...

*Precious Lord, take my hand,
lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired. I am weak. I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*

Amen.