

Sermon – December 17, 2023

"The Challenging God"

Texts: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-13

Prayer: Let your spirit of wisdom flow through us and guide us, O God, as we listen to your challenging message for us, here and now. Amen.

Christmas is just around the corner – 8 days from now, to be exact. But some have a depressing look at Christmas. Being together with family is not good news for everyone. Not good news for those confronted with illness or grief. Not good news for the community where shelters for the homeless like The Mission and Elizabeth Fry are maxed out as the days get colder. FAMSAC is giving out food for those who cannot afford a decent meal. There is nothing worse than feeling alone and hopeless, when the rest of the world seems to be gushing with joy. Globally, we are not there yet in terms of joy. The COVID pandemic still tops the list of worries in every country in the world. Add to that, the issues of hunger, famine and homelessness. Wars and violence didn't disappear with the anticipated arrival of the Prince of Peace. We are not there yet in terms of joy.

We have been listening to the voice of the prophet Isaiah since the first Sunday of Advent. Who is this prophet? What is he doing in this season of supposedly joyful celebration? Why do we need to listen to him? A prophet is more than a seer, a predictor of the future, or one gifted with extraordinary spiritual and moral insight. A prophet is a mouthpiece of God who lives in the present, looks around the community and addresses issues of concern. Prophets are rabble-rousers, disturbers and challengers of those who live comfortably without caring for others. Prophets see injustice, poverty, political upheavals, religious callousness, immorality of all sorts. They open their mouths to protest and raise their voices to warn those in power. They call for repentance and transformation. Theologian Deborah Block explains that *“prophets are voices of Advent because they say what no one wants to hear. They point in directions no one wants to look at. Prophets hear God's voice when everybody else has concluded God is silent. They see God where nobody else would guess that God is present. They feel God's compassion for us, God's anger towards us, and God's joy in us. They dream God's dreams and utter wake-*

up calls. They hope God's hopes and announce a new future. They sing God's song and interrupt the program with a tune of disturbance."

A popular adage tells us that the flip side of joy is disappointment. The prophet Isaiah tells us stories of disappointment. The Israelites were exiled. Life had become like a wilderness to the people. Then there was a shift. Those years in exile were over. Isaiah sees a highway- a road safe and secure, leading to the city gates. On it will travel the lost ones, captives and slaves, an exiled people now redeemed and able to return to their homeland. We've heard the reading from the 61st chapter of Isaiah written for people who had been liberated and had returned home - which had been their fervent dream and hope and prayer for generations. However, once they finally made it back to Israel, it was not exactly the sort of paradise they had imagined. Disappointment and a sense of hopelessness once again confront the people. The prophet Isaiah, however, sees a vision of hope, peace and joy for the people. He sees the return of shalom - God's reign, where God's spirit empowers them to "bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

These words sound familiar as words spoken by Jesus himself in the Gospel of Luke when he first preached in his hometown of Nazareth. When Jesus reads Isaiah's words, Jesus places himself inside a tradition that is alive today...that of prophetic ministry and witness. The social gospel was born at that moment and millions of people have followed Jesus down the path. These words of Isaiah proclaimed by Jesus are earth-shaking, life-changing words. It's no wonder that some people in the synagogue had a hard time hearing what Jesus was saying that day. Good news for the oppressed speaks not only for those who live in poverty and the homeless, but for those whose spirits and bodies need healing from illness, grief and loneliness. Releasing the captives could mean freeing those prisoners of war who were taken as slaves, or it could also have meant personal captivity to both spiritual and material temptations that harm both body and spirit.

Fritz Eichenberg was a German-born artist who moved to the United States in the 1930s. While still in Germany, he drew politically and religiously poignant artworks. One of his drawings, called "Jesus in the Breadline" shows Jesus walking with the "least of these", men and women who most people thought were outcasts, poor, worthless. Eichenberg portrays Jesus as a homeless man, and when you think about it, if Jesus came during the era of breadlines, He probably would have been standing in one. This type of imagery speaks to me, portraying Jesus as someone who walks with the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, the prisoners, the homeless. The words of Isaiah spoken by Jesus 600 years later are God's challenging words. And when God challenges, it takes many forms and many responses. When God challenges, it causes us to reflect and to reach out.

What happens when God challenges us? What if someone barges into the midst of our comfort zones? How would you feel? How would you respond? What would you change in your life? If Isaiah's words were the clarion call for Jesus, a summary of his mission agenda, then they should be included in our mission statement as well. What is the good news for the poor and the oppressed today? Is there good news for the street people, the brokenhearted, the prisoners, the physically and mentally challenged, the unemployed? What about the most vulnerable in our society? The children, the women, the elderly, the homeless? Is there good news for them? A wise preacher once said that "the truth will make you free, but first it will make you miserable." This creates for us a unique responsibility and calling. If we are touched and challenged at the same time by the lives of our brothers and sisters, then we can respond with the same kind of love we have received from the God of love and compassion. If we are more than willing to be passionate about our mission as a church and do acts of justice, love and kindness, as we are about budget line items, what miracles could we still accomplish in making a difference in the world?

I was driving to the church one day thinking about my schedule for the last few weeks leading to New Year - meetings I still need to attend, reports I need to write, preparations for the upcoming worship services, emails to check and phone calls I absolutely have to make, and what I need to cook for supper that day. All of a sudden, I found myself pulling into the parking

lot at BCUC. I had driven the 10 kilometers to work and had no idea how I got there. I have been so absorbed in what was coming up that I was completely oblivious to the present. You might be in the same boat with me. We are still in Advent but this season doesn't seem to exist in secular culture, where everything is spiraling quickly toward Christmas. No time to wait, no time to notice, no time to reflect, no time to engage, no time to be present. All of a sudden, we will find ourselves on Christmas Day not knowing how we got there. Advent is a holy season, a season that bids us to be present, to wait, to engage, to respond. So much is evoked in this season - hope, longing, joy, the bittersweet awareness that the world is both beautiful and broken. Consider all of these things. Sit with them. Pray with them. Be aware of this God time of great promise and joy. Today is a good time to reflect on our Advent call as followers of Jesus. I take that to mean that we have been challenged by a God who compels us to make a difference, no matter how big or how small, here and now. The words of the hymn, "I Am the Light of the World" expresses the message of Isaiah's words spoken by Jesus: *"When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner, To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among people, To make music in the heart."* Amen.

Sources: Engaging the Spiritually Disconnected: Inviting the Culture to Move to the Deeper End of Life's Pool, patheos.org. Standing on the promises by Kathleen Norris, The Hard Work of Making Life Right by Michael Brown., Disengage the Autopilot by Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, December 12, 2017