

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“The Challenge of Hope”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, July 12, 2020

Isaiah 55:1-13

*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 labour 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.*

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

*For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.*

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you offer us your word. A gift of hope and wisdom to light our paths. May we open our hearts to hear what we share this day and be empowered to serve You in the days to come. In Christ's name, we pray, Amen.

Those of you who know me well know that I am a news junkie. Many evenings I would watch Lester Holt, prepare dinner, and we would eat. And then later I'd watch other news shows about other events going on. I like learning about events, the actions of government, both local and national...and as the daughter and granddaughter of a scientist, all the new discoveries and research going on. And with Lester Holt's show, he ends with a wonderful heartwarming piece about someone in the world doing something that can inspire us and tell us that good things do happen. Now, if you had told me the pandemic would go on this long, I wouldn't have believed you. But now here we are. And indeed, when the pandemic started to flare, in the beginning, I realized I needed a reprieve in the evening from the intensity of it all. After all, we were all living it every day, and it simply got to be too much to hear about all night. I would go to bed and thoughts of the news of the day would run in my head and I just wasn't sleeping well. I realized enough was enough, and I needed a diversion at night. So much to Scott's surprise soon after this sheltering in place started, we would clean up after dinner, I would look at the mail from the day before, and I would walk away from the television. Now luckily, at first, spring was coming, and I had flowers and vegetables to plant and take care of. So, I would go out and do what I call a Prince Charles. I would ooh and ah and talk to the plants, watching tomatoes form, blossoms on the green vines turning into green beans and lettuce that was growing along with basil and oregano. When it wasn't too hot, I'd sit on the back porch or I'd go up to our room and start reading. And at this point, I've read a lot of good books. Some of them I've talked with you about on Zoom, but there are others too. So, if you need some good recommendations, let me know and Annie Littlepage will tell you I do deliver books to your front door. But indeed a few weeks ago, I thought we might be turning the corner, and I took a sigh of relief from things coming down in New York City and I started watching a little bit more of the news. But then, in the last week or so I heard of great spikes in new places and that Missouri had the highest report of numbers for the day and I felt discouraged. I found myself wondering if this pandemic would ever end and I worried about the people I love, and I miss seeing all of you. I know in talking to some of you recently, I'm not alone in struggling with these feelings. Bill reminded me of the role of the book of Laments and the songs that are in the Bible. Because at times we do need to lament, and this is such a time for it. And that would have been a good title for yesterday's NPR program. People lamented, they lost loved ones, they were dealing with the challenge of the pandemic and the never-ending news of it. I knew I was not alone in feeling this way. But as I had read the passages for today's lectionary

readings, I realized something. I realize I can't stay there. I have to open my heart and my mind and look for what is good or new or possible. I have to find ways to build up hope. And I think this morning's readings are an attempt to do just that.

Now, the book of Isaiah is a very long book, and scholars have realized because of the many different historical events noted in it, it has covered so much ground in history. It could not have been written by one person. Most scholars think that the book had at least three different writers. The first part speaks to the call of Isaiah and the visions of the prophet, telling the people what would happen if they weren't faithful. And indeed, the worst came to pass. Things were destroyed. They were defeated in battle and sent off in exile to a foreign land. These were not easy times for the people of God. They were times of questioning who God is and why this had happened. But then, in the middle of the book, the tone changes. What we heard from today is the closing chapter to what is known as Second Isaiah. This writer moves from warnings and exhortation more to words of comfort and encouragement. In chapter 40, which opens this section, we hear those familiar words, "Comfort, comfort my people, and they will rise on eagle's wings," or chapter 43 where it says, "Fear not. I will redeem you. I have called you by name and you are mine." The writer also uses images planting and harvestings, reminders that seasons come and go, new life blossoming forth, and then fading in fallow times, and then the season for planting, a new life comes again. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, the writer reminds them, though things may seem difficult, that this is not the only season of their lives. This is not the end of who they are as God's people. Other seasons will come for. And the prophet reminds them that the word of God is not just a word. It is a source of life, for as we say it is the living word, going on to say, "So shall my word be that comes out of my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, like giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater. But it shall accomplish that which is thy purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent. We find in these words a sense that what is difficult now, in time will become a different time. A time for a new life. Instead of the thorn, he says, shall come up the cypress. Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle.

Even in times that are difficult, with snakes and briars that hold them fast or pain of thorns, these will fade and be replaced by new and green life. These words are a moment of reprieve, a reminder of the promise that what is happening in the moment is not the end of the story. The writer reads words of hope that speak of signs of new life in the midst of a fallow time. So, it is interesting. We also find ourselves looking at parables, sowers and planting as shared by Jesus in the Matthew reading. It is part of a series of parables on sowing and each one has a different nuance. The one we hear this morning speaks of seeds that sprout on shallow soil and don't take root and can be easily scorched by the sun. Others are sown in areas in deep undergrowth and are choked out. But those planted in rich soil take root, nurtured by soil and sun and water, grow into bountiful crops. It also has a part of the reading that was left out in the lectionary section, but I think it's important. It says for this people's heart has grown dull, their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes so they may not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes for they see and your ears for they hear. In connection with Isaiah's reading, I think we are reminded that faith is something that must be tended and nourished by the word and the presence of God and our spending time with God. That we must not let our hearts grow dull and shut our eyes. That is the gift of hope. It is what nourishes us in body and spirit.

I shared with you some words that Chris Keating wrote in the column in the Post-Dispatch. He's a colleague, who's the pastor at Woodlawn Chapel. And in that passage, he'd talked about the fact that "As people of faith, we have to acknowledge this is the time of grief" for the change we've already experienced, for those who have lost loved ones in a time when we cannot minister to one another as a community as we normally would, and for all of us who feel that the normal routines of our lives have been uprooted in the most unexpected ways. He talks to us about the fact that we need to grieve so that we can prepare for a different future. I note too that Isaiah does not berate the people for their struggle or doubts. He understands the reason for their despair. And there's a depth of compassion, he offers. He encourages them to see that they cannot go back to the way things were but there's still a promise for the future. The writer doesn't say that doubt or struggling and faith are wrong, rather encourages us to understand that these moments can be opportunities for strengthening, for nourishing, for new understanding and gaining wisdom and faith. I think that like Chris in his article, Isaiah was aware that part of this part of the struggle is letting ourselves grieve what was in order to be open to something new. Life after the pandemic will be different and we really don't know how.

On the other hand, as we explore new things in the meantime, we can experience some ways of knowing and some ways of joy as we find our way. We live in a culture of instant gratification, and these words remind us that life has seasons and they cycle throughout time, a reminder painfully enough, that things are not always in our control and that the best thing we might be able to do is let the Spirit move among us and comfort and heal us and lead us forward into something new. And I will say that in this time, I have found wisdom and help from watching others do things in new ways. I see lots of families riding bikes together and many more people walking and hiking. I read in the paper about Tony Tomato, who used to supply vegetables to restaurants from his farm. But when they were suddenly closed, he found a whole new group of customers, families and individuals seeking to get fresh vegetables that he delivers to every week. And here among us, Bill and Travis and Rob are

doing ministries in new ways. I know that Rob and the Children Youth and Family Committee have held a popsicle night in the parking lot. It gives a chance for families to see each other even from a distance. Bill and Travis have recorded music with people through voice and other instruments. And for others of you who never imagined you'd do it, you have learned about Zoom and connected with others over the internet. Some of us are finding new pleasures or treasures in life that sustained us in a time that seems a bit surreal. So, while it is not easy to let go of some of the way things were, we can also find creativity and hope in trying new ways of being in the world. And I found myself thinking with a new insight, the very depth of the hope offered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For in the midst of the difficult and challenging times of Roman occupation, of poverty, of the way of life of rejecting those who are unclean or disabled, God sent His son as an act of hope. God sent His son, who walked among us, challenging all of us to be and live as new creations focused on love and compassion, mercy and service.

Indeed, that's what He did. He walked and talked and preached and broke bread with so many, especially His friends. It was an act of hope that at first, though, seemed to end in tragedy. We know that the disciples who trusted and learned from Him walked through a dark valley after His death. Whether they were in the locked room or those on the road to Emmaus, those who went to the tomb were full of despair by not finding his body there. They were sure that the story of a new era had ended. But the meaning of the tomb's emptiness, they came to realize was a very different ending. It was an ending filled with new life and hope. Hope is a gift from God. It is a gift that helps us ride out the difficult times and lead us through. It's a source for creativity and doing a new thing. It's a way to cultivate and nourish our faith. It is a gift from God that can feed and quench us in the midst of our thirst and our hungering when we feel parched and dry. Hope is part of the rich soil that with sun and rain provides a way to grow and blossom and flourish once again. It's a gift that allows us to see with our hearts and our eyes new ways of carrying through to new days. As Isaiah said, it is that which will help us in the days to come that will bring us out in joy and lead us in peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.