

Rebuilding Ancient Ruins

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Isaiah 58:9b-14

I.

What do you associate with the word “prophet”? I’m not talking about PROFIT but PROPHET. [conversation].

One of the best known and best beloved of the books of the prophets in the bible is the book of the prophet Isaiah—only it turns out that the *book* of Isaiah probably contains the writings of not *one* but *three* prophets, and since we have no other name for them we call them all – can you guess? “Isaiah.” And to keep them straight we in the business call them First Isaiah, Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah. Each of them was writing in a different time, responding as God’s spokesperson to vastly different circumstances. First Isaiah wrote when the end was drawing near for the kings of Israel and Judah...a very long time ago indeed, someplace in the mid to late 8th century before Christ. He lived in the kingdom of Judah at a time when the nation we think of had split into two—the original Isaiah lived in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Second Isaiah lived during the time of exile, in Babylon, more than a century later. That writer’s concerns are around sustaining hope and identity in exile.

The third prophet—call this one third Isaiah if you want but we have no real idea what the name was—the third writer was concerned with what it takes to rebuild the knocked down, beat up city of Jerusalem, and the nation of which it is the capital, as the exiles returned from captivity, in the time of the great Persian emperor Cyrus, who allowed them to return to their homeland. This prophet was concerned with what God has to say in a time when the exiles are back home at last, but overwhelmed by what faces them, trying to re-integrate with the old-timers who never left: trying to rebuild their city and their homeland. This is the prophet we meet in Isaiah chapter 58, a new voice in a new time, yet strangely in complete continuity with the message that came two centuries before:

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,*

and to break every yoke?

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of God shall be your rear guard.*

*Then you shall call, and God will answer;
you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am.*

What is a prophet? Three prophets we call Isaiah in three different times each spoke for God, but spoke to different circumstances. One spoke to the nervous kings of Judah, facing invasion and civil war. One spoke to a people who were hanging up their harps by the waters of Babylon—and could sing no more. And one spoke to a people overwhelmed, coming back to a city in disarray and a society that had lost its way. But each of them offered spiritual sustenance, guidance in the face of temptation to corruption, greedy self-service and despair. And each of them held their people radically accountable to God—which is to say, accountable to each other, and to the poor, and to the stranger in their midst.

*If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*

*if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.*

*The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.*

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;

*you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.*

II.

What is the prophet's word to 2016? We live in our own times, and so we cannot simply grab ancient words and try to apply them like a cookbook. Different times call for different emphases, different hopes, different warnings, different summons.

In times of too much self-satisfaction, the prophet speaks a word of difficult truth, holds up a mirror to the pretenses and profiteering of the mighty. **“Woe to you who forget my ways”**

In times of exile, far from home, the prophet says, on behalf of God, **“You are still my people. I still love you. Do not forget** who you are and what the values are that made you strong. Do not forget my ways of justice and love.

In times of rebuilding, and return, the prophet's voice reminds us, God's voice reminds us, that **we are in this** not for ourselves, not to make a quick buck, but **for the common good**, the good of all people—not only the frozen chosen, not only the prestigious or the powerful or even the middle class, **but all the people**. That's the word for us from Isaiah 58 this morning. And in this time, in this nation and in this city, we desperately need that word.

As many of you know, when Lynn and I decided to move to Schenectady, we did so well aware that the city, and our congregation alike have had to face into some real challenges. And yet we also knew that this faith community, and this city, are rebuilding. Perhaps it was the temporary insanity that comes with enthusiasm that caused us to buy an ancient house—well old anyway, 1752 to be precise, and though it is in good shape for 264 years old, it's, let's be real, it's a money-pit. Across the street new neighbors have purchased, for not that much money another ancient house—only this one is 4000 square feet and been vacant for several years—and leaking. The amount of blood sweat and tears required to rebuild that house—I hesitate to guess.

The work of rebuilding isn't just about houses and businesses. Yesterday Lynn and I took part in a run/walk sponsored by, of all people, the Sikh community of the area. Sikhs are the fifth largest religion in the world, but many of us hardly know what they stand for. Founded several hundred years ago in what is now northern India,

Sikhs are well known for their turbans. But in fact they are interested in religious understanding, in universal harmony and the dignity and wellbeing of every human. And yesterday, the young people of the Sikh community led the way in having a fundraiser for the “Miracle on Craig Street”, an effort by local Schenectadians to buy back an old Hamilton Hill community center at auction, and bring back the kinds of service to the community, the kind of community, that it once provided. Yesterday, the Sikh community took a prophet’s stand.

Here in the city of Schenectady, as in many cities across upstate New York and across this nation, we are in a time of rebuilding. Our schools are in need of restoration; our neighborhoods are in need of hope and encouragement. We are also in a time of gathering up the exiles of wars and privation in other lands. How shall we respond? For Greg Lindenfelser and some others, recently it has been welcoming a large Syrian refugee family, on our behalf. For Charlie Lent and a host of friends—children as well as adults-- it has been creating community in a School of Wonder and Mystery. For a faithful core of you who turn out every month, it is offering a meal to our neighbors, not as conventional charity but as an act of hospitality and community.

At least a snippet from the mysterious prophet we call Third Isaiah might as well have been written directly for us in this town, in this nation for this very day. The prophet tells us that we have a doable reconstruction process. The prophet reminds us that our spiritual lives are inseparable from our real day to day relationships and decisions.

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It is easy to get discouraged. In this city, in this land, we are in a time of many conflicts that come with the need to rebuild our communities and our cities. In times of rebuilding, in times of raising up the broken and forgotten once more, some folk manage to make a lot of money, ostensibly doing well by doing good. In times when people who are not of the same families or heritage or ways of living come together, US and THEM and Fear of the Other threatens to undo a people. The powerful target the weak. And in the North American version of this phenomenon, the legacy of racism and xenophobia, sexism and homophobia—all these add a cruel bitter twist.

And yet there is a word from God, for us. The word says: if you want your reconstruction process to flourish, you must work together; you must overcome the forces of hatred and oppression that threaten to undo you. The word says: you can do this. You can flourish. But you must find a way to ask forgiveness from those whom you have put down. You must create new centers for community based on justice and love, not hate and systematic destruction. And the word says we are not in this alone. Creation is permeated by a Holy dynamic. God is all around us and all through us.

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This is the sacred calling for those who gather in the name of God, on this street corner, in this time. This is our future. This is our now.