

Pastor Roy's Sermon from September 9, 2018

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

To whom is Isaiah talking? The verse before reads, "Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees." Isaiah also names them, "the redeemed, the ransomed."

We often think of redemption and ransom in spiritual terms, in terms of forgiveness for sins. Isaiah took forgiveness seriously, but he is not talking mainly about forgiveness of individual sins in these verses. Isaiah 32 speaks of the day in which local and regional political leaders will lead with justice. He claims in 32:5 and following: "A fool will no longer be called noble, nor a villain be said to be honorable. For fools speak folly, and their minds plot iniquity; to practice ungodliness, to utter error concerning the Lord, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink. The villainies of villains are evil; they devise wicked devices to ruin the poor with lying words, even when the plea of the needy is right. But those who are noble plan noble things; and by noble things they stand." He then goes on to warn the local women of nobility and wealth that the days of plenty are numbered and the social order they enjoy is about to be turned upside down.

We hear redemption and ransom and we think, "Ah, yes, God forgives us for our sins and all is well. That's all we need, we simply need the forgiveness of God." If that were the case, Isaiah would tell the nobles and their wives to ask forgiveness for their petty sins and mistakes and then go on enjoying their lives, but instead, he focuses on their actions in society and especially toward the poor. As people of means he calls them to take care of their poor neighbors instead of stockpiling wealth for some future need which may never arise.

Remember, Jesus was very aware of what Isaiah proclaimed. He quotes Isaiah regularly and had Isaiah's scroll close by at the local synagogue. Isaiah proclaims that the hungry should be fed. That the poor should be cared for. Isaiah's society was not a society in which the poor could pull themselves up by their own strength and resolve. If you were born poor, you would die poor. Period. Unless you were an outright thief. I'm not sure things have changed so much. If a child is born in poverty today, with all the social, sometimes racial, cultural, economic issues related to being poor, chances are much better that unless someone who is not in poverty mentors them, if that child is not raised with hope, and opportunity to have a meaningful career and given self-esteem and self-discipline along the way, that child will die poor. There is a bit more hope for the poor today but the deck is stacked against them, all things considered.

Isaiah speaks in chapter 33 of a coming day in which justice will dwell in the wilderness, righteousness in a fruitful field, there will be peace and quietness and trust forever. Those who despise the gain of oppression, who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it, who stop their ears from hearing of bloodshed and shut their eyes from looking on evil—they will live on the heights; their refuge will be the fortresses of rocks; their food will be supplied, their water assured.

Isaiah is not speaking of a spiritual salvation, of heaven and hell, of being set free from the penalty of sin. He is talking about economic realities. His words are clear that unless Israel repents of its fixed economy where the rich stay rich and the poor suffer and die, all of Israel will go down. All of Israel will suffer, but especially the elite, because they are not accustomed to being hungry, or thirsty or in abject misery. The plight of the poor will not change, but those with plenty will be joining them

because they refused to live into God's justice. It's as if Isaiah is saying that if a portion of the community is left out of economic hope, that eventually all will pay the price. For Isaiah it was Assyria and Babylon, later it was Greece and the Roman Empire. Because all of the society was not working together for peace, they were quite vulnerable to major powers outside their boundaries. They would have been vulnerable even if they were all united and working together without mistrust and infighting, but clearly didn't stand a chance with a few haves and a whole bunch of have nots.

In our world, we think of justice as "What's mine is mine, what's yours is yours. If you happen to not have enough, that is your problem. I have no responsibility to help you. I am free to enjoy my abundance without any concern for you." If I have plenty, then the poverty of the poor does not affect me except that it makes me feel sorry for them. Isaiah is going beyond sympathy here. He is suggesting that unless the folks with plenty share and work toward a more just society, then they are doomed. Not just spiritually, but economically. Perhaps this is Isaiah's version of "What goes around, comes around."

If we listen to the Bible, especially the Old Testament law and prophets, we will learn a different kind of justice. Biblical justice is that we are all responsible for each other. Those with the ability to help are wise and truly blessed as they lift up the poor and bring them hope.

Back to Isaiah 35. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, then the lame shall leap like deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

There will be healing and the earth will provide enough. Perhaps in the gospel lesson, Jesus learns a lesson, or maybe he helps his disciples learn a lesson when the Gentile woman pushes the limits of his test. Her daughter is set free because she thinks there is enough healing in the mercy of God for Gentile child to be set free. Jesus heals the deaf mute man despite Jesus' exhaustion.

The message is clear, if we have the courage to act as if there is enough, there will be enough and we will be part of the justice of God, which is not about holding on to what is rightfully mine, but learning that joy only comes when we learn to share. We find gifts and hope that we never dreamed we could know. Because we act. Believing might come first, but only by acting on behalf of those God places before us, will we ever know joy.

Isaiah and Jesus are not talking about faith as believing or being mainly concerned about our own physical or spiritual welfare. This world with limited resources works best when we all work together for a bountiful whole and the giving and receiving of God's abundance. The prophets and Jesus are talking about faith as action which will make us complete and whole and full of joy—not happy, but full of a deep contentment that flows from the abundant care and mercy of God.

Perhaps the best way to approach the invitation of Isaiah and Jesus today is that there is room for us to stretch in our sharing of the abundance which God has given us. So God grant us courage to stretch in our generosity. You are an ongoing example to me of generosity, not just in money, but in time, and love and taking part in the life of the greater community which surrounds us. Thanks be to God. Amen.