

Let me begin by saying my introduction to our Scripture and my sermon will be longer than my norm, so you might adjust the fidget alarm on your watch by five to seven minutes. If it is of any comfort, I cut an additional five to seven minutes!

The prophecy of Isaiah is often considered to be written in three historical periods, referred to as first, second and third Isaiah. First Isaiah warns of doom, and specifically the exile of the people from their land anticipated by a foreign power overtaking Israel, not due to Israel's weak military, but its own disobedience.

Second Isaiah is full of hope the exile will soon end, and envisions the joy of the people returning home. As I reflected on this, I thought of today's exiles, particularly those from Syria, fleeing both ISIS and their own government's terror, seeking refuges of safety for their children, while still longing for the day when they can return home, resettle their land, reside in their own houses. This is the hope of Second Isaiah.

Our reading is in Third Isaiah, the prophecy's final section, thought to be written following the return home. We might expect it to be full of joy, yet Third Isaiah takes us on a roller coaster ride. The promised return has happened, but not the restoration. New leaders made promises they did not fulfill, idol worship was flaring up again, as well as lying and false witness. All contributed to the prophet's verbalization of God's frustration, "They still don't get it." So, intermixed with a lingering hope for restoration, Third Isaiah sets forth words of condemnation, caution and consequence addressing the reemergence of unfaithfulness and injustice.

Yet, in rereading chapters 55 through 66, I found more than a fear of divine consequence underlying the prophet's words. What emerged was a deep sadness about the lack of respect for the God who dwells among the people. It is as if they are acting with no sense of God's presence.

I thought of matriarchs and patriarchs in our families, often grandparents or great-grandparents to whom honor is accorded, and in whose presence one senses dignity. There is an attention to manners, and both words and actions are gauged to acknowledge the deep respect in which they are held. This sense can remain even after that loved one is passed as one may hear, "What would grandmother think, how would grandfather respond if they heard us say that, or saw us do this?"

Third Isaiah seems to pose the question, "People, have you forgotten our God dwells among us, and is present with us in all we say and do?" As Third Isaiah's roller coaster nears the end of its ride, the vision of hope and restoration returns in chapter 65, with images of new creation – new heavens and a new earth, and a wholeness in the cycle of life from childbirth to old age.

Let us read responsively our Hebrew Scripture lesson, Isaiah 65:17-25:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating;

for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat;

for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD - and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox;

but the serpent – its food shall be dust!

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

For me, our epistle reading seemed an unusual pairing with our Isaiah lesson. In many translations, including our pew Bible, the message seems to be a simple message: “if you are idle, you don’t eat.” That teaching is certainly there, and probably points to a situation with which the Thessalonica church members were dealing. Yet, biblical scholars suggest it is not simply idleness, or laziness at issue, but a broader sense of a lack of discipline. When the church models disorderliness, or a lack of discipline in faithful living, it diminishes its witness, for Christ, to the larger community. This leads to the summary command, “Don’t become discouraged in doing what is right.” I will be reading the Common English Bible translation that uses the word “undisciplined” instead of “idleness.” II Thessalonians 3:6-13:

Brothers and sisters, we command you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to stay away from every brother or sister who lives an undisciplined life that is not in line with the traditions that you received from us. ⁷ You yourselves know how you need to imitate us because we were not undisciplined when we were with you. ⁸ We didn’t eat anyone’s food without paying for it. Instead, we worked night and day with effort and hard work so that we would not impose on you. ⁹ We did this to give you an example to imitate, not because we didn’t have a right to insist on financial support. ¹⁰ Even when we were with you we were giving you this command: “If anyone doesn’t want to work, they shouldn’t eat.”¹¹ We hear that some of you are living an undisciplined life. They aren’t working, but they are meddling in other people’s business. ¹² By the Lord Jesus Christ, we command and encourage such people to work quietly and put their own food on the table. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, don’t [become] discouraged in doing what is right.

Yesterday, I had the joy of meeting my son and 11 year old grandson in Cooperstown to visit the Baseball Hall of Fame. I will simply say, if I need a baseball fact, I can just give Alex a call rather than Google it. On the way back home, I visited my mother in Albany, then listened to the new "Prairie Home Companion" on the drive back to Boston.

For those who do not know, "Prairie Home Companion" is a weekly radio show created by Garrison Keillor some forty years ago, in which there was always a segment of "The News from Lake Wobegon," the fictional Minnesota town he created, about which he would tell us the latest about a cadre of residents of the town and their relatives. At the beginning of this segment, Keillor would always say, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon.," and at the end would conclude, "That's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

Keillor recently retired, and while the show continues, the unique stories of Lake Wobegon retired with him. Yet, as I drove home last evening, I wondered, if Garrison Keillor would have begun last evening with, "It's been a quiet week..."? Perhaps he would have, because he always did, but I suspect he would have also guided us to the discussion taking place down at the Chatterbox Café after the election, and even project ahead what might be said this morning at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Catholic Church, or the Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church.

This morning, I will incorporate our two Scripture texts within my sermon, but I also feel called to speak to this week's election. For those who believe politics and worship and preaching should not mix, I agree, if the politics is of personal endorsement or condemnation. Yet, from the Pharaoh of Israel's Exodus and Antiochus Epiphanes of the Maccabean Revolt, to the teachings of Jesus and the letters of Paul in the face of Caesar Augustus, Pilate and Herod, the life of our faith has always existed within the political world. I suppose those who choose the monastic life of study and prayer can to some extent isolate themselves from the secular and political, but few of us can separate the two. So, I contend my words this morning are not political, though I will say something about politics and politicians as a means of recognizing our call and mission as the church to be stewards of hope and witness for Jesus Christ.

If it is necessary to assure you of my ability for bipartisan critique, I will share that, during this election, two examples of when I was horrified and disgusted were Hillary Clinton's basket of deplorable statement, and the sexual comments of Donald Trump. Yes, I heard both offer what I considered tepid apologies, but my point is, in this election more than any I recall, I heard many people, of all political stripes, who were upset with their own candidate's words or behaviors, though often this was coupled with, "But look at the alternative." I think we know, not only did we hear it all, but our children and grandchildren took it all in as well, in a campaign that was more than any I recall, centered on maligning character and not political policy.

Most of us have experienced both joy and disappointment at the results of an election. In my twelve presidential elections, as I joked last week, I have always voted for the right person. I have not always voted for the winner; in fact, I purposely did not the one time I voted for a third party candidate back when I was the age of today's millennials.

Yet, I can honestly say, that in each election when my candidate did not win, I experienced what may seem to some to be a weird hope. There was an inner feeling of “it will be okay,” or “it won’t be that bad,” or simply that we will find unity as a nation. Admittedly, in some elections I have had to push myself more than others, but even when I have felt deeply disappointed, worried and troubled, I held to that weird hope, even past the initial accommodating week of concessions and pledges of unity.

In addition, at times of personal joy at the outcome of an election, I have tried to be alert to the emotions of those for whom the results may have been disappointing, or even devastating to their hopes, values and politics. I have not always done this as well as I could, even though I knew who the people were – family members, friends, and as a pastor, there are always some members rejoicing and others hurting following an election, even though I often do not know individual’s political leanings. I introduced that notion of our community as a church family last week, as we gathered as a unity of saints around the communion table, a sign of our oneness in Christ.

So, I encourage you to reach out to a member who you think may be hurting, or joyful. Meet for lunch, or coffee, or prayer. Use “I” statements” to honestly share why “I am hopeful and joyful,” or why “I am concerned and despairing.” I believe such reaching out affirms the admonition of our epistle lesson to be disciplined in the work of Christ, in this case to be about our call to show compassion and if needed, seek reconciliation. It also can begin to bond us in our shared call as stewards of Christ’s hope and witness.

A part of the vision of restoration Isaiah painted was one of “a transformed environment: peoples, habitations, and nature all woven into a complex relationship of wholeness, ... a new creation where the heavens and the earth are no longer alienated from each other.” [Bartlett and Taylor, editors, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 290]

I think that corresponds to the weird hope of mine after national elections, that the ideals of the United States will be realized where all peoples, of all nationalities, races, ethnicities, religions, genders, and sexual identities are given a rightful stake in the promise. If, as seems to be this year’s conventional, post-election wisdom, blue collar white folks have been left out of the promise, then the circle of inclusion needs to be opened to correct the wrong. Yet a corrective opening for some does not mean excluding others out of a fear there is not room for all.

Throughout Isaiah, the recurrent theme of the prophets is sounded that care for the poor, the marginalized, and those with neither voice nor power is a measure of their being the people of God. Again, if one truly senses God’s presence, which for us is the Spirit of Christ, we will hear the cries of the poor with God’s ears, and attend to those left out with Christ’s compassion. “All that happens to them matters to God.” [Ibid., p. 292] So too, what happens to the poor and disenfranchised is to matter to the church. If it does not, then we are simply a social club attending to our own needs, and our outreach is simply charity to make ourselves feel good.

Back to our political reality. Speech has consequences, and in a social media world, many more people are listening, including children and youth. So, if Hillary Clinton had been elected last week, I would have hoped she would have further apologized and made amends for labeling a certain group of people as deplorable. Just so, having been elected, I hope Donald Trump will further apologize for what most do not accept as simply locker room, or “boys will be boys,” talk. Even with words spoken a decade ago, I believe a response of honest humility and reconciliation will say much, not only to our twin granddaughters, who turned thirteen the day before the election, who heard the words and expressed confusion, but also for our 5 and 11 and 13 year old grandsons as well. They are among the confused and hurting and fearful voices I have heard. There are others as well, such as immigrants and Muslims, for whose cries and concerns and fears we are to keep our ears alert.

So, that’s my political recommendation, and as is often said in politics, “I take full responsibility for it,” though I have noticed saying the words is often the extent of the responsibility taken. I could say more, yet let me insert here that if some believe I have crossed the line, if perchance I have said anything so offensive to agitate you to write the Session to either reprimand or release me, that is okay. I say this, not to suggest the option, or even glibly dismiss any offense felt, but to make another point.

Lynn and I are much more secure than many in our country and most in our world. I have a good, fully funded pension waiting for me, and I am almost positive no politician is going to mess with the benefits of current social security recipients. We knew our personal lives and lifestyles would be affected little, if at all, by whoever was elected last Tuesday. That is a part of our privilege.

That is my point. Isaiah called out those thinking, “things are just fine with me, no need to look past myself.” I believe that is the call of Christ to us as well, for while political parties will adjust their agendas based on whether they win or lose, the church always has God’s agenda on the table, no matter who is in power.

Our unity is found in Christ, for he modeled for us one who taught, and sat and ate with people others deemed deplorable. Jesus was alert to the cries of those needing healing, and the vulnerability of children. He uplifted the goodness within the foreigner, and paid attention to the needs of the marginalized and those labeled by stereotype.

If we are Christ’s church, we are to model him. In my study of our lessons, I wrote the following, before the election:

In the midst of our joy, will we hear their cries?

In the midst of our comfortable lives, will we see their discomforts?

In the midst of our own caring faith community, will we notice who still fears crossing our threshold?

In the midst of our declaring Christ as Lord, will we remember our Lord welcomed and ate with deplorable people, and loved people of different ethnicities, cultures and even religions?

The questions are as valid after the election as well. If we hear the cries, see the discomforts, notice the fears, and welcome the outsider, we will be the church.

Perhaps this can be done as an online church, hiring a part time pastor who is great at social media, texting for Jesus, and tweeting sermons of 140 characters or less. If so, this sermon alone would spread over two years of Sundays. Seriously, I believe there is a creative ministry that can take place within social media for those who will never darken the doors of a church. But for now, this congregation has decided to remain a brick and mortar operation, where people gather for worship, hire staff for leadership, meet face to face for study, and commit to praying together for their joys, sorrows, concerns and confusions.

The vision in Isaiah 65 is “as much about the possibilities of the present as it is about the hopes for the future.” [ibid., p. 294] The church, including the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury, can be a percolator of possibility and hope. It is what propels us to open the windows and doors and listen for the voices from outside the security of our walls or the comfort of our pews. It involves our mission dollars which are part of our stewardship, but also our mission words in our everyday living. It takes all our support, for all areas of our ministry.

It’s not been a quiet week in the Lake Wobegon of America, and this week we may have found ourselves sitting in different booths at the Chatterbox Café. But this morning, we are the gathered church of Jesus Christ, who calls for us to be stewards of his hope and witness. So, with the closing words of our epistle, let us encourage one another to “never be discouraged in doing what is right” in Christ’s name.