

January 20, 2019

Scripture: Isaiah 62:1-5; James 4:7-10

Sermon Title: Draw Nigh

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Let us find a posture of prayer:

Holy God,

To have hope for the future, may we sit at your feet,
Draw nigh, listen to your Spirit, and steady our hearts.
May we know, once again, rattling deep in our bones,
That you hold the future.

In Christ we pray,

Amen.

1. I had the distinct honor of attending seminary with
the Rev. Brittany Toner.

She must be one of the most gifted encouragers on the
planet.

She just has this uncanny ability to look into
someone's eyes and to offer a message of hope.

Like me, she's in her first months of ministry...in her
case in the beautiful Florida resort town of Port St.
Joe.

(Believe me NO one felt sorry for her when her
bishop placed her there).

But just four months later, the rain came. Literally.

Last October, rain pounded fear into her bones and
onto the roof of the RV she was living in as Hurricane
Michael stormed through Port St. Joe.

She's okay. But she's shaken.

She's in her 20s and has been a pastor for a whole six
months.

And last week, as we here remembered our baptism
with the beautiful and encouraging words of Isaiah...
she preached from the same text.

But, just a couple months after the hurricane, with
signs of the destruction still visible in her daily life,
these words do not have the same comforting effect.

Recall the words the Prophet spoke into our lives last week: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you."

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you."

These words are, of course, *meant* to ignite hope and promise!

But what is it like to hear such words of hope and promise, even as you recover from the destruction left by raging waters?

Bits and pieces of normal life missing.
Fear still rattling your bones if not your rooftop?

2. As I look at our text today, I wonder if it isn't *our* turn to have *our* bones rattled... to feel some dissonance with a text that is ready to proclaim salvation when we aren't actually all that sure whether we *should* hope.

For those who haven't been following international church politics, things are heating up in the United Methodist Church.

Next month church leaders and delegates from all over the world will meet together in St. Louis to talk specifically about an issue near and dear to our vision here at Williamston United Methodist Church...

.....to be an inclusive and loving community practicing faith, mercy, and justice.

The international discussion will center around needed changes for full inclusion of LGBTQ siblings in the United Methodist Church.

Hurtful and awful things will be – and have been -- said, as emotions run high.

And it's not clear yet if anything at all will be done to pave A Way Forward.

Perhaps we will have to wait yet another year?

In this broken and schismatic time in the life of our denomination, I read these words of salvation from Isaiah and I hear what I know NEEDS to happen for the church...but the words also rattle my bones.

I'm just not sure we're ready for this message.

I hear God speaking hope to the church.

And I'm just not sure we're ready for this message.

*3 You will be a splendid garland in the Lord's hand,
a royal turban in the palm of God's hand.*

*4 You will no longer be called Abandoned,
and your land will no longer be called Deserted.*

*Instead, you will be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land, Married.*

I hear:

YOU WILL BE REDEEMED.

You WILL live into the story God has written for your lives together as the church sent with a message of hope to the brokenhearted.

Are we ready to believe this message?

No longer should we continue to feel abandoned to our own putrid debate where people talk across one another more than with each other...arguing a point rather than seeing genuine searching in the other... OR even caring about the state of the other's soul....

...which is our stated purpose for doing church *together*.

*4 You will no longer be called Abandoned,
and your land will no longer be called Deserted.
Instead, you will be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land, Married.*

I'm just not sure we're ready for this message.

3. If we move into this new era of justice and freedom and equality, it seems to me we will do so kicking and screaming.

But we DO come from a prophetic tradition.

And – by definition – that means we have hope!

Prophecy isn't first and foremost about predicting the future.

It is about seeing what is before us with greater clarity.

It is seeing beyond what is apparent.

It is imagining the world as God intends it.

Judging as God would judge.

Calling evil-doing out on the carpet.

And being able to see forward to a day "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

On this MLK weekend, I recall how King used these words of the Prophet Amos to dream, despite ALL evidence to the contrary, that America could...AND CAN...be a place of equality for blacks and for whites.

When "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

4. The prophet...Amos, Isaiah, MLK, the prophet understands God's word, understands, through Scripture and much prayer and devotion...

God's heart...

...and God's will

...and God's justice

and *reinterprets* our world for us.

The prophet is able to see beyond... beyond what our culture says is "good enough" justice

...and "good enough" hope,

...and "good enough" vision for our lives.

It's about imagining something better and BELIEVING that it will come!

Walter Brueggemann says a prophet can “Trace the path of disaster in which we are engaged,”

Racial inequality, global climate change, wealth and poverty disparities....

The prophet can “Trace the path of disaster in which we are engaged,”

AND go further STILL:

“The amazing thing about the prophets,” he says, “is that they were able to pivot” after tracing that path of disaster to say “with confidence that God is working out an alternative world of well-being and peace and security”

...in spite of all the evidence we see in our lives to the contrary.

Howard University Professor Kenyatta Gilbert says:

*“Hope is born out of suffering...
...trying to understand what God has for us...
It is rooted in this courage that says:
‘this is not all that there is and
we cannot settle for the goods of this world
and so we are going to hope for a future
that is beloved, where personhood is affirmed,
where dignity is esteemed.’”*

5. *You*, my friends, *you* come from a prophetic tradition, rooted in the Scriptures.

It’s a tradition that always demands justice and righteousness for God’s people and for all who are on the margins.

You come from a prophetic tradition in the church, too... despite the fact that it is and has ALWAYS been a deeply flawed and human institution.

Through the centuries, it has accomplished great good AND great evil...and both at the same time.

Methodists, for example, were key players in American abolition of slavery and the underground railroad.

Even further back, to the founding of our nation and the American Revolution, Methodists were already anti-slavery and had mixed-race churches.

We have been forerunners of justice, visionaries for truth, indispensable powerhouses for Truth.

But even within the church and among people of faith, it has always been the prophets who lead while many of the rest of us uncomfortably follow OR even RAIL AGAINST God's forces for change.

Thank goodness the prophets carry the rest of us along.

But sometimes we come kicking and screaming.

Church institutions have also...and at the SAME time been used to justify slavery and to perpetuate inequality.

And those early mixed-race churches didn't last long.

By the time MLK came around and led a Christian movement for justice and equality for black Americans, there were plenty of white clergy and white Christians who came into the new era kicking and screaming.

And this is also the state of the church today...with many coming into a new era of justice and equality kicking and screaming.

6. As we move into international discussions, I remind you that you are... and have been... prophets for the United Methodist Church.

Williamston United Methodist Church...small but mighty, speaking into a wasteland by showing the world what should be.

And I don't have to tell you that the work of the prophet is never fun.

When this congregation first started prophesying inclusion, there were picketers.

Many have told me that at that time you felt you were on the outs with other Christians – in Williamston and in your own denomination.

But you've also seen a shift, I know you have.

And the kicking and screaming we are seeing today are, in fact, labor pains for the birth of something new...

We don't have to know what that looks like yet to believe we WILL grow more holy...see God's vision more clearly...

And that some will come kicking and screaming all the way.

And I hear today the Prophet Isaiah speaking life again into our desires and hopes for the church:

*For Zion's sake I won't keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I won't sit still
until her righteousness shines out like a light,
and her salvation blazes like a torch.*

*2 Nations will see your righteousness,
all kings your glory.*

*You will be called by a new name,
which the Lord's own mouth will determine.*

*3 You will be a splendid garland in the Lord's hand,
a royal turban in the palm of God's hand.*

*4 You will no longer be called Abandoned,
and your land will no longer be called Deserted.*

*Instead, you will be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land, Married.*

*Because the Lord delights in you,
your land will be cared for once again.*

7. The prophet always sees the *desolation*, never denies the wilderness, and is ALWAYS able to look beyond to the hope that is found in the healing powers of Christ Jesus, in whom there is no slave nor free, no Jew nor Greek, no male nor female...in whom ALL are beloved.

The prophet condemns what is unjust, but always hopes for the salvation of their worst enemy.

And if we want to continue to be prophetic for the church, it will take what Gandhi and, later, Martin Luther King Jr., called “soul force.”

It will mean seeing beyond this present disaster to the hope we profess.

And Professor Kenyatta Gilbert says, there’s no way around it: that starts with listening.

“To first become silent...To drown out the noise” so that we can “hear a voice outside” our own.

Prayer and devotion and communion together centers us on God and helps us see with clarity the path forward that will lead toward hope...and not just for ourselves, but for the redemption of the church and the redemption of the world.

Our text from James today reminds us to draw nigh to God, and God will draw nigh to us.

8. And so let us close with these words of Poet and musician Kevin Max Smith:

draw nigh
to me, you calloused beggar
draw nigh and I will do the same

draw nigh
as the moon to the earth
draw nigh and I will do the same

draw nigh
when your success is heavy
draw nigh and I will do the same

draw nigh
and I will draw nigh to you

draw nigh
When poverty reigns
draw nigh and I will do the same

draw nigh
to me, you of swollen pride
draw nigh and I will do the same

draw nigh
When the waters cover up your soul
draw nigh

(Kevin Max Smith, at the foot of heaven)