

A Spirit and a World To Love

Baccalaureate Sunday

Text: Isaiah 58:12; Acts 1:8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In the prophecy of Isaiah 58:12 we have this wonderful image, this picture of those who would turn to their neighbor and love their neighbor, love their world on behalf of God, for those that have said,

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundation of many generations, you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

And on this weekend we are mindful again and again of that which happened fifty years ago in our world. We remember the D-Day invasion and the invasion on the Normandy beaches and that dark hour in world history when we and the allied nations rose up on behalf of freedom and human dignity. We cannot help but think of that text in terms of that mission that was executed by those who love freedom—the democratic nations. It’s incredible to relive it again. I am amazed to think that I am about as young as one can be and still have some personal remembrance. I was just a little kid, but had a couple of brothers-in-law over in the thick of it and remembered adult conversations about it, and felt some of the anxiety and tension of those days. That was a noble hour.

I think in my earlier experience I tended to compartmentalize my religious or spiritual experience from that which happened in the world. But I recognize more clearly now that the Spirit of God, the breathing of God, is not restricted to what happens in a setting like this, but also impacts what happens in the larger landscape of the world. I believe that that noble effort to maintain the best of Western Civilization and the freedom and the democracy of the world was a response to the Spirit of God. There is a sense to which we were loving the world in the power of the Spirit, in that we were engaged in an effort for human freedom. [It calls forth] the image of the prophet in Isaiah:

“You will restore the ancient ruins and foundations, and you will be a repairer of the breach. You will create cities and streets to dwell in.”

That image of the prophet is so characteristic of the Hebrew prophet who had images of *shalom*, of that messianic age when Messiah would come, when there would be harmony and peace in the world.

As I was reflecting on that text in the context of this weekend, I came across this document written by Rabbi David Hartman who was in Muskegon a month or so ago. It's about the present Israeli/Palestinian peace process. Rabbi Hartman is striking a blow here for openness, to let that process happen. But in the midst of this document, he says this, "No period in history is immune to the forces of regression." Then he quotes in quotation marks, "It can never happen here. Here tolerance, pluralism and decency are firmly established and secured." And to that he responds, "Against such expressions of naiveté and false complacency stands the classical statement of Biblical realism. Behold I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life."

As I was thinking about that, I thought I've heard veterans interviewed in the documentaries that are on television these days, some who have said there will never be another battle like it. There will never be another naval assault like it, etc. All of those statements are true in the sense that the world and technology that happened at that time has been so greatly overcome. You think about sending coded messages across the channel. You think about the surprise element that was able to be effected in that massive movement of armaments and men and women. You realize today that our spy satellites circle the globe and from outer space track the movement of armaments and armies so that there's a sense in which Normandy could never happen again. Then I read David Hartman and I recognize how easy it could be to become complacent and to say that that was the world's hour of darkness and it could never happen again. That is not true. Darkness and evil are lurking always in the wings of human experience. If our technology has made it impossible ever to duplicate the Normandy invasion, so our technology has enabled us in an instant to wipe our masses of population, more than all who have died in all the wars of human history. If North Korea has a bomb, and if it would loft it over the demilitarized zone, in an instant it could wipe out more persons than in all of World War II.

So I read a little more from Rabbi Hartman who says those beautiful prophetic images are not images of what will be at the end, but rather they are possibilities of what needs yet to be realized within history. They are a statement of historical inevitability. They are a statement of present possibility. The call of God to God's people is to join God's Spirit in the creation of justice and righteousness and Shalom. Those wonderful images of the prophet, "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain. The lion and the lamb shall dwell together. They shall beat their swords into plow shares and their spears into pruning hooks. They shall learn war no more." Those images from the Hebrew prophet are images that are to call us up short, and to present us with an alternative reality, an alternative possibility.

We are called as the people of God, not to sit by and wait for history to run its course when Messiah will come and Shalom will cover the earth. We are called to be the instruments and the ages of Shalom, of justice, of peace, of righteousness right here and now. We are called to the power of the Spirit of God to love the world. The God, whose heart was revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, and whom the followers of Jesus experienced as still powerfully present with them, is the God who continues to move through the landscape of history, and is a part of the human scene and is calling us to join in the cause of justice and righteousness, leading to peace. The one true and eternal God, the God of Israel shown to us in Jesus, continues to breath through us, to empower us to be the instruments for peace and the channels of grace in our day.

The people of Judah in exile had a complaint against God. They said, “Look, we’re religious, we worship, we fast, we go through sacrifice and ritual, but you don’t notice.” The answer through the prophet is: “That’s not a fast I choose. The fast I choose is to set the prisoner free, to take off the yoke of oppression, to feed the hungry, to take the homeless into your home. Then your life will break upon you. Then you will call and I will answer, and I will say, ‘Here I am.’” In other words, in this Old Testament understanding of things, the service of God is the service of humankind, and the worship of God is the care and the love of a neighbor. Jesus knew this passage. Someone has said that Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats, must have been written right out of Isaiah 58. They said to him to whom he had said, “Come into the kingdom.” They said, “When did we see you hungry? When did we visit you in prison? When did we clothe you?” Jesus said, “Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you’ve done it to me.”

There’s always a tendency to compartmentalize religion into one little part of life and then to get on with life in a kind of secular fashion as though God is divorced from that. Not so. God says, “Do whatever rituals you need. Do whatever worship you need. Go into the temple if you will, offer sacrifices if you will. Take bread and cup if you will. Do what you need in order to be conscious of my presence. But if you really, really want to know my presence and power, then take care of your neighbor—the poor, the oppressed, the homeless. Then miraculously, in your neighbor, you’ll find me. You cannot find me any other way.”

If you don’t believe that Jesus knew this prophet, then turn a couple of pages to the 61st chapter of the same prophet, a couple of chapters later and you’ll find there, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me and has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.” If you go to the 4th chapter of Luke, verse 18, you’ll find in the inaugural sermon of Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth the sermon that got his family and friends so upset with him. He cited those words. The agenda of Jesus was to set the prisoner free, to affect human dignity and human freedom. The mission of the Church, the calling of the people of God, is to love the world for God’s sake. If we would follow the way of Jesus, then we must take Jesus seriously. This is what Jesus was about.

I must admit to you at first I entitled this message “The Spirit and World Mission,” but I changed it because for me world mission spoke too much of my past understanding where I would send this graduating class out into the world to preach the Gospel in order to make the world Christian. But now I want to say to you graduates, if you want to know God in power, in fresh experience, love the world. Care. Be filled with compassion. Give your life away, and in giving your life away, find your life in the presence of God. That’s the paradox, isn’t it? Jesus said, “Go into all the world. Proclaim good news; the good news that Jesus proclaimed that God is near, that God is full of grace, that God is for human dignity, for human freedom, for the fullest realization of the human potential of all people.” It is the calling of the Church not to convert the world, but to love the world and let the consequences be in God’s hand and to allow the breath of God to flow through us empowering us in an outpouring of ourselves in love for a world so desperate for love and grace.

I once thought that finally the world would become Christian and then Messiah would come. Now, now I don’t know so much about all of that, but this I understand clearly: Messiah has come and the Spirit is moving, and I am invited to follow in the Way of Jesus in loving the world and therein know the presence and the power of God. A Messianic age is not an historical inevitability. It is an ever present possibility if we dare to love the way Jesus loved. That’s why we’re in Romania. That’s why we’re in Wales. That’s why we’re in Africa. That’s why the world is our parish—to love the world for God’s sake.