

February 5th, 2023

Year A; 5th Epiphany

Isaiah 58: 1-12

Psalms 112: 1-9

Matthew 5: 13-20

Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

*Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.*

*Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,*

*as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;*

*they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.*

*“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”*

*Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.*

*Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.*

*Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.*

*Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?*

*Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?*

*Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?*

*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 the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

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

*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.*

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

I was so glad to see the readings assigned for this week, both texts rich with possibilities for preaching, full of vivid images.

Isaiah prophesying to the people that God is unimpressed with their empty rituals, their showy fasting and wearing sack cloth, and then heading right back out the door to cheat folks who work for them, stealing their wages, and then going on and starting fights and brawling in the streets!

And God calling us to stop any ritual without meaning, and to use our energy instead to lose the bonds of injustice, and share our bread with the hungry.

And God calling us to work on ourselves, to stop the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil.

**Stop all of that foolishness and destruction and self-centeredness and, THEN, Isaiah tells us, THEN you will be like a well-watered garden,
and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.**

And in Matthew, right after Jesus has preached the Sermon on the Mount, with those upside-down values of God:

“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

Then Jesus calls on us to be salt and light in the world.

So much in today’s scriptures to learn, to follow, but my heart is slow to listen, weary just 36 days into 2023.

The vicious and merciless killing of Tyre Nichols in Memphis, the too numerous to take in mass shootings in January, the cruel war in Ukraine reaching almost one year long and still going, and the violence and excruciating tensions erupting again in Jerusalem.

With all of these in the past 36 days, I have found myself swamped by violence and hate, unable to take it all in, and drawn to withdrawing, to turning away from the pain.

I want to be salt and I want to be light, I want to be a well-watered garden, God’s vessel in our hurting world, but I cannot seem to even absorb it all, much less help.

Tim and I have a little problem with books. We both love books, love to read, and cannot wander through a book store, a thrift store, even pass a little free library, without picking up a few, and a few more and a few more.

As Covid started, almost three years ago, and we were all locked down at home, I energetically tackled my shelves of books, and packed up many boxes of books to give away.

But three years later my shelves are mysteriously full again!

Marital tension erupts when we decide to point out how the other one needs to get to the job of cleaning up, and getting rid of their stacks of books.

Tim is worse about this than I am, self-righteously pointing out how cluttered my shelves are.

But his comments prompted me, while I wrestled with this sermon, to look through my shelves for books to let go of.

The first book I picked up I did not recognize, and I thought, great! I'll put this one in the giveaway box!

But the title "Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home" caught my eye and I rightly remembered that TIM had brought the book to me, from a free library.

Tim has great taste in books, so I sat down and paged through, and found water for the parched garden of my spirit.

The book was written 30 years ago by a Quaker, a writer and professor, named Richard Foster.

I opened the book many pages in and found myself reading about The Prayer of Rest.

Foster was writing of sabbath rest and asked how do we enter this Prayer of Rest, and how we humans always think we must work hard at something, try and try again to be good at rest!

Foster went on to tell a story of an older woman who had worked hard on prayer all her life, but never sensed God's presence.

She was then given the advice by an archbishop to go to her room daily and "for fifteen minutes knit before the face of God, but I forbid you to say one word of prayer. You just knit and try to enjoy the peace of your room." (page 97)

At first the woman said she loved this 15 minutes to do nothing, and not having to feel guilty!

But soon she began to enter the silence that surrounded the rhythm of her knitting. And then she later said:

"I perceived that this silence was not simply an absence of noise, but that the silence had substance. It was not absence of something but presence of something...at the heart of the silence there was He who is all stillness, all peace..."

The author goes on to call the Prayer of Rest a time to *"enter this intense stillness, this quiet alertness"*.

We all have challenges. I have many! Including cleaning up my book shelves, and, even more, resting and listening for God.

The first 36 days of 2023 in our world have been brutal and chaotic and frightening. And Isaiah and Matthew call us urgently to let go of our pointing of fingers and our striking with a wicked fists, and to be like well-watered gardens, ready to feed others, and to be salt and light to offer a path of hope to others.

But first, but first we need to listen, to *"enter this intense stillness, this quiet alertness"*.

That would be a change for me! I'd much rather keep pushing forward and doing. But without the quiet, without the stillness of God, we are so easily drawn to our ideas and not God's call, to our certainty, and our pointed fingers and anger, and not the unexpected path of God's way.

So, evidently, I need to learn to knit again!

Pray for me and I shall for you. And let us pray for Tyre's family, and for the city of Memphis, pray for the Ukrainians and the Russians, pray for those killed in mass shootings and those who wrestle over gun laws, pray for the Israelis and the Palestinians. And pray for hope in the 37th day of a new year.

Amen.