



Making a Place for Everyone: State of the Church Report

Isaiah 51:1-6

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Last Sunday I talked about the three sections of Isaiah, the first coming in chapters 1-39 before the people were forced into exile; the second coming in chapters 40-55, offering God's words to the people in exile; and finally, chapters 56-66, where God speaks to a people returned from exile. Today's text is in Isaiah 51, which is closing in on the end of the second section during their time in exile. It is written to a people who are exhausted from the pain they have had to endure. Though God has promised them a great future, I can only imagine there is concern on their behalf that the future won't be much better than the present.

In the midst of their worry, today's text offers an invitation to look back in an eagerness of looking forward. "No fewer than seven times in these six verses listeners are invited to participate, joining the prophet in remembering the past and imagining the future."ⁱ But a quick glimpse at their current situation may cause one to wonder, in the midst of a season of uncertainty, why would we want to look back? Why would we want to relive the failures of the past? Why would we want to draw to mind the mistakes that led us to our current situation of direness?

To answer these questions, we have to take a closer look at the call of the prophet speaking the Word of God. The invitation isn't calling the community of God to dwell on past troubles, but is instead calling the hearer to consider the greatness of God in circumstances of the past that seemed to be hopeless.

Verse 1 invites the community to remember the rock from which they were cut, the quarry from which they were dug. Without other contextual guidance to go on, it seems the prophet is calling them to remember their time enslaved in Egypt, when one of their primary responsibilities was moving stone and rock. In that season of the life of the community, in a season of hopelessness, God rescued them, and delivered them to the promised land and gave them new life.

Verse 2 calls on the community to remember Abraham and Sarah, who were, in old age, barren. They thought there was no hope for their lineage to continue. Yet, out of the hopelessness, God brought not only one descendent, but God indeed brought forth generations too great to count from Abraham and Sarah.

Verse 3 calls on the community to think of the wilderness and the desert. In the barren and hopeless places, God not only offers a path and new life, God brings abundance. God turns that which is seemingly hopeless into a garden of new and abundant life, the likes of which only Eden is comparable.

Having reflected back on how deliverance and new life have been made possible by God even in dire times, the prophet now commands their attention to look forward. “Listen to me,” he begins, “give heed to me, my nation; ... Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.”

I love the visual this passage offers. The call is to look back, then to look up to the heavens, then to look down at the earth, and then to look forward to God’s coming deliverance! The call of the prophet to consider what God has done and what God is going to do is a healthy reminder that where we are now and who we are today is not isolated from who we have been or who we will become.

I think the call of the prophet is as important today as it was for the Israelites back in exile. I think it’s important to be assessors of where we are, to understand our current situation, to understand our current location and the connection each has with the past, the present, and the future. So today, I want to offer you a State of the Church report, where we look back to see from where we have come, to look around and acknowledge where we are today, and to hear the vision of what God may have in store for us in the future.

The Leadership Board began some of this work back in January, as we sought to better define our mission statement. Our mission statement reads, *We believe God is love, so we’re making a place for everyone to know that love.* You may hear it more succinctly offered in the phrase, *Making a place for everyone.* I challenged the Board to better define what such a statement means for the church today. I wanted to know how such a statement was rooted in our past, and how we could clarify it to help us lead the church into the future.

Utilizing input from many of you, the Board defined three core values that offer a foundation for the mission statement and express the ethos of who we are as a community of faith. I mentioned these back in May when the Board finished its work, and I want to use them today to frame this look at where we are as a church.

First, to be *Making a place for everyone*, Washington Street UMC has an underlying core value of offering ***Engaging and Creative Discipleship.***

As a community of faith, we are called into deeper relationship with God through prayer, worship, and spirituality. It is discipleship that guides our relationship with God. But beyond our relationship with God, discipleship is what guides our understanding of how we relate to ourselves and how we relate with one another. It is discipleship that lays the foundation and offers us instruction for how we use our gifts and our being to engage with the world around us. Because discipleship is so mission critical, it is a necessity to offer discipleship opportunities that are engaging and creative.

In some ways, discipleship begins as we gather for corporate worship on Sundays. And as such, we are always working to keep worship vibrant and relative, inviting you to join in the work of God in the gathered community on Sunday mornings. This Sanctuary has served this church since the doors of the building opened in 1851. It provides a place of rest and reprieve, a place to connect with God, with yourself, and with one another. The space has gone through renovations, changes, and updates over the past 165 years, including the most recent addition of the new sound system just a year ago. To prepare for years to come we are looking at some other updates and fixes to the sanctuary space to ensure this space can continue to serve the needs of the church and the community for many more years to come.

Apart from Sundays, we are also looking for other engaging and creative ways to invite you to a deeper relationship with God and with one another. From the presence of the Hal Fisher Sunday School class, which has offered a Sunday morning class for this faith community for over 50 years, to the Grace Circle, which has called the church to offer missional support to the community for almost 30 years, small groups have long been a vital part of the lifeblood of this community. Over the past few years we have seen a number of new groups formed that have offered opportunities for deepening your understanding of God and your connection with one another. We have eight groups that are currently meeting at least once a month and there are a few other groups in the making, including a Bible study starting up in September that will be studying the Old Testament using the Disciple Bible Study curriculum. It is my wish as your pastor that each of you has a small group to offer you support and for you to walk with in your discipleship journey.

We are also looking at other creative ways to emphasize a focus on discipleship. Last year we offered the alternative worship experience called Encountering God, which invited you to learn new ways to be in prayer. This spring we offered the Lenten Retreat, which invited you to a weekend away to look more closely at Christ's final days before the crucifixion. This November we are offering a one-day Advent Advance, in which you will be invited to prepare your mind and heart to encounter Advent with a more focused and charitable mind.

Through intentional discipleship that encourages life-long learning, we will continue to learn how God is calling us into relationship with others, and calling for us to use our gifts in the work of God's love. As such, the core value of *Engaging and Creative Discipleship* springs us into our other two core values.

The second of which is, we are a ***Nurturing and Welcoming Community***.

We are a people who take seriously Jesus' call to welcome all people. We are called to greater inclusiveness and deeper connection with our broken and suffering world, and we are called to more intentional care for one another by establishing a more nurturing faith community. We are committed to this open and inclusive ministry. When we say we are making a place for everyone, we mean all people, or as Gordon Brown says in his litany, "Welcome,"

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here:

*If you are young or old, you are welcome
If you have brown skin, black skin, white skin, or any color of skin, you are welcome
If you are married or single, you are welcome
If you are gay or straight, you are welcome
If you are transgender, you are welcome
If you are a man or a woman, you are welcome
If you cannot hear or see, you are welcome
If you are sick or well, you are welcome
If you are happy or sad, you are welcome
If you are Republican, Democrat, or Independent, you are welcome
If you are rich or poor, powerful or weak, you are welcome
If you believe in God some of the time or none of the time or all of the time, you are welcome*

You are welcome here

*Come with your gifts, your pain, your hope, your fears
Come with the traditions that have helped you and hurt you
Come with your experiences that have made you and broken you
Come with a mind, ready to engage, and a heart, open to discern
Come and listen for the Sacred Spirit that calls you to love your neighbor wholeheartedly, seek justice, create peace and practice compassion*

You are welcome here!ⁱⁱ

We will continue to live this reality, and we will live it without apology. To do so, we must continue to grow in our understanding of what it means to be a *Nurturing and Welcoming Community*. We have an amazing hospitality team who greets at the doors, prepares and serves coffee and snacks, and serves as ushers in worship, but we have to keep working toward Christ-focused hospitality that answers the question, what does it mean to welcome people as Jesus would? How do we extend the invitation of welcome like Christ?

How can we fulfill Christ's invitation to the children, when he says, "Let the little ones come to me"? How do we more intentionally welcome and nurture our children and students, and how do we create for them the space they need to receive love, learn about God, and share in the work of the community?

How do we fulfill Christ's invitation to the hurting, when he says, "Come to me, all who are tired and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest"? How do we ensure that those who need rest know this space exists for them to find rest? How does such a call require us to change how we utilize this space? How does it affect the way we engage and interact with the surrounding neighborhood?

This second core value of being a *Nurturing and Welcoming Community* leads us into our third value. If we are truly engaged in the community in which God has placed us, if we are really

nurturing and welcoming others, then we will have no choice but to engage in the work of reconciliation.

So, finally, to be *Making a place for everyone*, we have an underlying core value of ***Connecting for Social Justice***.

We are called to intentional, ongoing missional outreach that demands bold, new ways of sharing God's love. This is not work that any one person can accomplish, but will require an intentional act of connecting with one another and with other groups and churches in our community. Behind every leader for justice, there is a community of activists. While we may know the names of justice stalwarts like Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Fred Korematsu, none of these individuals could have been successful in their work without the many people working with them in the work of justice for women, people of color, low-wage workers, or immigrants.

Our work with the marginalized in the community is only as successful as the joint efforts that go into them. For example, over 6 years ago we were the first organization to open a breakfast ministry in Old Town, offering breakfast one day a week. Today, there are two other churches offering breakfast, and together, we are working to find other churches or organizations to pick up the other four days of the week. Such a ministry provides a necessary meal, but it is only possible to satisfy true hunger by connecting with our community in a joint effort.

We are blessed to have many great partners in the community such as ALIVE!, Carpenter's Shelter, Alexandria Community and Human Services, ACT for Alexandria, and Jefferson Houston. From providing meals to the hungry, to the ministry of the Preschool, to offering after school space for students to have internet access, we are connecting with each partner in the work of providing life essential needs within the local community.

As we look to the future, we have folks seeking God's guidance in how we might offer relief for refugees, and we have folks praying for a vision on how we can join with the Office of Housing to provide housing options for low-income residents.

Connecting for Social Justice is a vital ministry in the world right now. As we move forward, we should be asking questions of our involvement, like, how does what we are doing help others be freed from the cycle that they find themselves in? How are we empowering others to find self-determination and new life? How are we changing our own patterns and the patterns of this community so that others can find healing? Who do we need to connect with to be a part of the work of reconciliation in this community?

Together, these core values, *Engaging and Creating Discipleship*, *Nurturing and Welcoming Community*, and *Connecting for Social Justice*, define for us what it means that we are *Making a Place for Everyone*. In staying focused on these core values, and in maintaining our focus on this mission, I stand before you with great appreciation for your joining in the work of God in this community through this church. We can look back to the past of this church, from the 1850s in

the creation of the church, to the heyday of the congregation in the first half of the 1900s, to a season that felt like exile as the 90s ended, to today; I can tell you without question, in looking at each season of the church, God has never abandoned the work of this church. Through the high times and the hard, God has remained steadfast.

And this is the invitation of the Almighty as we look to the future, are we ready to keep up with the great witness of God's love in the world? Are we prepared to declare God's salvation and testify to God's deliverance? The work of declaring God's love and living it in practice will not always be easy, but it is the invitation of the prophet. The heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, those who live on the earth will die like gnats – but the salvation of the Lord will be forever, and the deliverance will never be ended. Let us rejoice and let us continue to share in proclaiming God's mighty grace and redeeming love, that we may continue the work of making a place for everyone to know that almighty love!

ⁱ Angela Dienhart Hancock. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Gordon Brown. "Welcome." *Shaping Sanctuary: Proclaiming God's Grace in an Inclusive Church*. Kelly Turney ed. Reconciling Congregation Program, 2000.