



The People for Whom the World is Our Parish

Isaiah 2:1-5

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In this Easter Season, we are looking at who we are as United Methodists. As we speak, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church is meeting in Charlotte. For those who have missed the past few weeks, the General Conference is the only entity that can speak authoritatively on behalf of our denomination. They are the equivalent of the Methodist Pope ... only, the General Conference is comprised of over 800 delegates, not 1 individual. They speak on behalf of the church through a litany of legislative and plenary sessions, prayerfully led by the Spirit and advised by parliamentary process. The General Conference held their opening worship service last Tuesday afternoon, and they will continue to meet through this Friday's closing worship service.

Over the past few weeks, we've looked at who we are as United Methodists by walking through the three General Rules of the church: do no harm; do good; and, attend the ordinances of God.

This morning, we're going to look at the mission statement of the United Methodist Church, which pulls from the Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28. The statement reads, "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

Let me read that again, because if you don't know this, you should: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

Here at Washington Street United Methodist, we have our own mission statement, which we believe is our local way of living into the denominational mission statement. Do you know our congregational mission statement? Here at Washington Street, our mission statement reads, "We believe God is love, and so we're making a place for everyone to know that love."

Our local mission statement is not separate or conflicting with the denominational mission statement, it's just our local way of expressing the denominational mission.

John Wesley, the founder of methodism, had his own mission statement ... or at least something that reads as a mission statement. In 1739, Wesley wrote in his journal, "I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, [it is my] duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to; and sure I am that his blessing attends it."

As we think about who we are as United Methodists ... as we wonder why we do what we do, I want to keep these mission statements at the forefront of our minds. "Making disciples of Jesus

Christ for the transformation of the world;” “making a place for everyone to know God’s love;” and, “the world is my parish.”

Let’s turn to our text in Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah begins this prophecy by looking to the future. “In days to come,” he writes. This text takes on an eschatological focus. (Eschatological means “relating to the judgment,” or “relating to the final coming of God’s kingdom.”) The prophet is directing us to what the future will hold.

“In the days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.”

We should keep in mind that this text is being written by the prophet Isaiah during a time of empirical turmoil in the middle east; perhaps a time not too different than today. There were multiple episodes of war between the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Israelites during the time of Isaiah’s prophetic reign. In the midst of this turmoil, the prophet is reminding the Israelites that the future of the world will not be dependent upon *any* nation. Instead, the nations will *all* flock to the Lord. In his commentary on this text, Dr. Bruce Birch notes, “Every generation needs assurance that the powers of the world – whether the Romans of Jesus’ time or the principalities and power of our present age – do not determine the future.”ⁱ The future of the world will be centered upon God, and God alone.

The prophet continues to envision what this future will look like:

“Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us in his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

In the way the prophet envisions the future kingdom of God, you can already begin to hear the foundation of the mission statements we referenced earlier. From the mountain of God ... from the place of Jerusalem ... there will be instructions given for how we might live into the will and glory of God. Quite possibly, it will be the instructions and word of the Lord that go from Jerusalem that will bring the nations together before God. Think about those words: “making disciples of Jesus Christ ...” and “the world is my parish.” It is the vision of the future that we might be part of the work that brings the nations to the mountain of God.

If we take a pause here, we can look back at the life and work of the church and we can say we’ve been pretty intentional about this kind of work. Especially the Church in America, we’ve been pretty intentional about sending out missionaries all over the world to help spread the word of God. Even within our national boundaries, you’re likely to have someone knocking on your door (be it Jehovah Witnesses, a pair of Mormons, or representatives of some other Christian sect) who are wanting to share their understanding of God’s message.

At least in the past couple centuries, the church has not had a lack of willingness to go forth and offer instruction, and proclaim the word of the Lord.

But the prophet Isaiah doesn't stop speaking after the pronouncement that instructions shall go forth, calling all nations to God. The prophet continues in verse 4, "[God] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

I think in the midst of our eagerness to go out and convince others they needed to come to God, we stopped reading before verse 4. We heard that the word of the Lord was to go out from Jerusalem, and it was to call all nations back to the presence of God. And so that's why our forebearers did. They have sought to take the word of God to all nations. We have declared, as Wesley did, that the world is our parish. But instead of going forth and proclaiming a message like Isaiah, that puts God in the seat of the arbiter and judge, we've put ourselves in that all-powerful seat.

It was Christians who came to the shores of North America, pillaged the native tribes, and stripped the people of their indigenous names and languages. It was Christians who brought back men and women from Africa to be forced into chattel slavery. It was Christian missionaries who went into Latin and South America, setting up systems of dependency where-upon the missionaries became the "god" who provided water, food, and medical resources. And again, as I named a few weeks ago in reference to the mission trip I used to lead, this isn't just something we've done to those outside of our national borders ... we've set up that same kind of dependency within our own country. We've set up our own empire as a god.

I know America is not alone in this, but there is a perverse and abundant claim in our nation that we are somehow God's favored, and we have taken for ourselves the seat as global judge and arbiter. And to ensure no one else can threaten that seat, we've converted ploughshares and pruning-hooks into military weaponry. Just consider, the Fiscal Year 2024 budget for the Department of Defense is \$1.6 trillion. \$1.6 *trillion*. In contrast, the USDA budget is only \$385 billion, a budget which is supposed to provide support to ensure every American is fed, including support for our American farmers, and giving funding for programs like SNAP, TEFAP, and Child and Senior Nutrition Services.

We can't overlook this: the budget for ploughshares and pruning-hooks in America is one-quarter of that which we spend on swords and spears. For a nation that likes to say it is rooted in Biblical principles, it seems we've missed Isaiah's understanding of the direction we should be moving.

In Isaiah's prophecy, the opposite direction is the one that is claimed to be God's will. "Instruments of taking life are converted to implements for sustaining life. The economy is converted. The world's curriculum is converted from learning war to learning the ways of God."ⁱⁱ

It's often easy for us to point fingers to those outside the church, perhaps just looking at politicians, and say they need to make a change. But Isaiah will have none of that. In the final

verse of our text, the prophet writes, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk into the light of the Lord!”

It is the house of Jacob, the community of God, who is told to take the first step. So let’s do that.

The United Methodist Church is not exempt from the white, American-centric mentality that has been a toxic force in the world. I start with “white,” because the history of our denomination has been dominated by the white population. Consider that beginning until 1968, our black United Methodist Churches were delineated into a Central Jurisdiction. They were subdivided out of relationship with white churches because white leaders in the denomination didn’t want black leaders in their local churches. White churches didn’t want to be governed by black bishops.

Not that we’ve fixed all of that, but as a denomination, we are making progress in that realm. We could, and should be making more progress, but at least that snail is moving. ... But we still have A LOT of work to do to decenter the American church from the decision making process in our global denomination.

After sending out years of missionaries across the globe, the United Methodist Church has expanded itself into a global body. Nearly 50% of our church body resides outside of America. And yet, the American population has maintained power, and is still the centered focus of the denomination.

One of the biggest topics of conversation at this year’s General Conference is regionalization, a structural change that would be a huge step in decentering America in our worldwide denomination. The structure of America-first is so embedded in our denomination, that to make this change, it will require a 2/3 vote of the General Conference, and then a ratification process, which will require a 2/3 aggregate vote of every annual conference member in the entire denomination. Should the structural change be passed at General Conference, it will take at least another year for the aggregate vote to be taken and tallied, and then probably another year or two for the changes to be implemented.

This is a huge step, and a step in the right direction. For as Isaiah reminds us, “God’s intentions have always been larger than just us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These kinds of hard, systematic changes, are central to our mission. Yes, as Wesley claims, the world is our parish. And yes, we are called to the work of making disciples of Jesus Christ. But the call of Isaiah, and the call of the Gospel, is not simply to convert people into a form of religion that revolves around our ideals. In fact, even in Isaiah, “The nations come not to be proselytized into the Hebrew religion – the concept of human religion is foreign to the text – but to learn from God.”^{iv}

This is the key focus of the second half of the United Methodist Church’s mission. We aren’t just making disciples, we are making disciples of Jesus Christ *for the transformation of the world.*

This is where our congregational mission statement takes its root. We're making a place for everyone to know God's love. In a world that is so me-centric and power-hungry, we are called to offer a space that is self-emptying and led by the Holy Spirit.

The invitation of the Biblical text is not to call people to be centered around us, or our leaders. Isaiah isn't inviting us to build a world that revolves around our nation, or our egotistical presence in the world. There is nothing in the whole of the gospel that invites us to center ourselves in the work of disciple making. The call on the church is to share in *God's* work of changing the world from the empirical ways of force, conquest, and power ... to the divine will of community building, mercy, grace, and love.

The United Methodist Church hasn't always gotten this right, but "from the beginnings of our denomination, we have been engaged in [the work of] world-changing. ... It is the very essence of who we are as United Methodists."^v Our ministry as a global denomination is about partnerships and community relationships. It is about fellowship and connectionalism. It is a call to share in honest, healthy, and faithful engagement with the world.

In his reflection on this topic, Rev. Derek Weber writes, "There is a world out there hungry to learn, and they just might be beating a path to our door. There is a world out there dying for justice, and they might be huddled under our awning right now. There are wanderers who have strayed down so many paths that their feet are sore, and their hearts are broken, and they sometimes stumble their way into our hallways and aisles. ... [and] Isaiah asks if we are ready to host, to teach about the ways of the Lord, to guide the world into paths of right living."

The invitation of the text is for us to take claim of our mission, and to live it in full. "The text does not scold or admonish, but it lifts a gleaming promise of what God will do in days to come."^{vi} And it invites us in, to share in God's work ... in the work of making disciples for the transformation of the world ... in the work of making a place for everyone to know God's love ... in the work of changing the world so that all nations and all people might share in glory of God on the mountain of the Lord. So may God lead our paths, and give us strength for the journey, for the in the days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and all the nations shall stream to it. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Bruce C. Burch. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Paul Simpson Duke. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Derek Weber. "#BeUMC Week 1: The People of God Who Do No Harm." umcdiscipleship.org

^{iv} Brevard S. Childs. *Isaiah: A Commentary (The Old Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.

^v Weber.

^{vi} Duke.