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September 12, 2021

Isaiah 58:9-12 “Repairers of the Breach”

What a joy it is to be here with you this morning! I am excited to get to know you and begin a journey of ministry together. PCO has such a rich history and incredible present of being engaged with the community and the world, living out the call to discipleship. I am eager to join you in this ministry. This morning I want to share some words about my sense of call in ministry and my sense of a shared call in ministry with you as a congregation; a ministry of hope, a ministry of witness, a ministry of grace.

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Join me in prayer.....Holy God, the words of Scripture are God-breathed words—inspired by you and given life through the power of your Holy Spirit. By your Spirit breathe your word into us, so that we become live with the language of faith in our hearts and are equipped to proclaim the message we receive, for the sake of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

Our second scripture reading this morning is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 58. Hear these words of encouragement and calling:

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. ***This is the Word of the Lord***

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Over the past 18 months we have been in a collective state of holding our breath in our country. The COVID-19 pandemic, acts of profound racial injustice, elections and aftermaths of elections, and political unrest have kept us on edge. We have been afraid to inhale too deeply lest the particulates of viruses, of anger, of frustration, of division, enter and fill our bloodstream. And yet we know we need to breathe deeply – breathe deeply of the words of God, breathe deeply of the life-giving grace of Jesus Christ, and breathe deeply of the power of the Holy Spirit. We breathe deeply because we worship a God who came to dwell with us – who is **with** us on each step of our journey. And this is good news – no this is great news – because we need that indwelling for the work we have in front of us. And we have work to do. Work of healing; work of repair; work of restoration; work of imagination.

Last fall I saw an article in which the physician and advocate for palliative care Ira Byock shared a story attributed to anthropologist Margaret Mead: Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. She reversed the question back to her students. They offered examples of when humans formed tools like shovels, fish hooks, cookware, and grinding stones. She listened patiently and then said, "These were important advancements, but they do not speak to civilization, our ability to live together in authentic community."

Mead went on to say that she considered the first signs of civilization in an ancient culture to be a femur (thighbone) that had broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal world if you break your leg, you die. You can't run from danger. You can't find food. You can't access water. You become the prey. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A broken femur that has healed suggests that someone has taken the time to stay with the fallen one, has bound and treated the wound, has carried that person to safety, and has cared for that person during recovery. Healing someone through difficulty is the beginning of a civilized culture.

When I read that story, it made me think of this passage from Isaiah. "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong." And it made me think about our calling as a church to help people heal, be it personal challenges of illness and injury, of addiction, of loneliness, of grief; of family strife; or be it the vast array of societal challenges we face - the fractures and fissures and downright breaks in our world.

I think a look back to the world of Isaiah can be a help for us. The 66 chapters in the book of Isaiah can be divided into three sections. The first section addresses the need for the Hebrew people to repent and turn their hearts to God as they face danger from first the then superpower Assyria and followed by Babylon. Chapter 39 ends with the Lord through Isaiah telling King Hezekiah that the days are coming when all that is in his house, and that which his ancestors have stored up shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left.

Chapter 40 opens with words of comfort for the Israelites who are now in exile in Babylon and the next 15 chapters speak words of hope amidst the despair of exile. They tell of the promised return to Zion - Jerusalem. The third section is where we find ourselves this morning. Here the

prophet is speaking to those who are now back home after exile and are seeking to rebuild community. Biblical scholar Juliana Classens notes that despite these various time periods and populations, there are some common themes throughout Isaiah, one of which is “imagining alternative worlds.” Classens says, “This act of imagining a world beyond the current reality is based on a deeply held conviction that God is able to transform a life filled with selfishness and self-interest into a world where people live according to God’s will and follow God’s word.”

When the Israelites returned from exile they had to deal with the frustrations of rebuilding Jerusalem – rebuilding their temple – the city walls – their houses – their streets – everything that was destroyed by the Babylonians when they conquered the city. Think about every building or remodeling project you have been part of... everything sticks to schedule and under budget – right?

Just think about assembling a piece of furniture – I’m looking at you Ikea. I recently read an article by Dayana Yochim in a financial blog entitled “Nope, it’s not money causing the most marital rifts. It’s this project.” And guess what this project is - According to a survey out of Great Britain, ex-couples (note that this is ex-couples) overwhelmingly cite the task of assembling furniture as the project that caused the most arguments. In fact, the article includes a helpful link to the 10 most difficult pieces of IKEA furniture to assemble. So if you want peace in your household, stay away from the NORDLI floating headboard bed, the PAX wardrobe and the HEMNES dresser. And for some personal self-disclosure, I would have to say that my husband Brian and I have been down that IKEA assembly road a few times ourselves and resonate with this story. Building and rebuilding are no easy tasks; assembling something from the ground up is no easy task. Repairing and restoring...bring on the duct tape and pray.

It is into the this time of hope and uncertainty that the prophet Isaiah writes. It is into this stress and tension of wanting – of deeply desiring – a return to community and seeing so much destruction, so much need, so much injustice, so much hurt and anger, that Isaiah’s words speak to. As Classens notes, “people are urged to look up and see the light, to see what is not yet there, to believe the fulfillment of God’s promise to restore.” Using beautiful language the prophet Isaiah helps the people to understand that God’s actions cannot be curbed by our limited vision. Isaiah reminds the people who is with them on this journey of restoration. Their Lord – their God.

Imagine hearing these words in dry and dusty Jerusalem filled with rubble and weeds. 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.

Imagine hearing these words while staring at the ruins of the great temple Solomon built, the city walls reduced to piles of bricks strewn through the streets, streets now impassable from the debris, imagine hearing these words: the Lord will guide you continually, and your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Isaiah's call to be repairers and restorers is also the call to us today, right here and right now. To help rebuild the lives of refugees seeking a new future in unfamiliar lands, to restore dignity to those who society has cast out, to repair fractured relationships through acts of reconciliation, to rebuild and restore community after a pandemic that has separated us for so long. And the Lord will guide us, the Lord will guide us so that we can be repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in. That is our calling. Each one of us in our individual lives, and each one of us in our collective lives as a community of faith needs to know that the Lord will guide us.

A few years ago Brian and I visited the 9/11 memorial and museum in New York City. Some of you may have been there or seen it in the media this week. The memorial consists of two squares, below-ground reflecting pools surrounded by waterfalls that begin above ground level. The pools are the footprints of the former World Trade Center buildings. The names of those who died in the attacks are inscribed around the pools of water. It is hauntingly beautiful.

The architect, Michael Arad, who watched the second plane hit the South Tower from his roof on the Lower East Side, described how, in the days immediately following the WTC attacks, he envisioned a memorial that incorporated the element of water. In an article about the design he said, "The way people came together in New York affected me greatly. I thought about my own experience and how important public space is for New Yorkers — a place where people come together and stand side by side with strangers, where you can feel a sense of community and compassion and stoicism and courage."

I so appreciate his recognition of a need for a place for people to gather. We gather at the river as we will hear sung in a few minutes; we gather at the spring and at the well. We gather around

the baptismal font and we gather at the Table. We gather as individuals with unique needs, concerns, and fears. And when we gather we become community.

What was so striking to me as I stood staring into the pools at the 9/11 Memorial was that you can see individual strands of water cascading down the sides- individual streams of tears for the loss of a loved one. But by the time the water reaches the bottom, the separateness was lost and it became a woven tapestry of water. It became a well of faith, where our individual tears are collected together and we share the pain. And from that pain emerges hope because we are not alone.

Frank read these words from the book of Revelation this morning, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell **with them**; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.” This is a promise that echoes throughout scripture. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” A promise that opens the story of Jesus’ ministry is bookended in Revelation with promise of a new creation where God continues to dwell with us.

God will dwell – God will be a continuous presence with us despite the chaos that surrounds us, despite the destruction wielded on us by the forces of nature or our own selfish ways. A continuous presence with us despite death. A continuous presence with us, that in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, makes us prisoners of hope. Shortly after he won the Nobel Peace prize, in an interview on his work fighting against the evils of apartheid, Tutu said, “In the middle of our faith is death and resurrection. Nothing could have been more hopeless than Good Friday—but then Easter happened, and forever we have become prisoners of hope.”

Prisoners of hope – we are bound by hope because we are a people who worship a God who is not only way out there – a cosmic transcendent love, but also a deeply personal God – a God who throughout our whole history chose to dwell with us; chose to come in flesh and bind us together.

For we are bound together through Christ – in communion with him and with each other. A Christ that takes the broken pieces of bone, the wounded flesh, the shattered hearts, the eyes that can’t see and the ears that can’t hear and the voices that have gone mute from too many years of crying. A Christ that takes all that brokenness and draws it together in love. It is Christ who knows that the pain of betrayal and the agony of the cross are not the end of the story, but rather the beginning of a new chapter.

Beginning a new ministry journey is a swirl of emotions – excitement for the road ahead, joy in making new connections and friends, enthusiasm for new opportunities; mixed with some sadness for the goodbyes to be said, and the whirlwind of busyness and sometimes stress that accompanies a move. It is also a time to celebrate the power of the Holy Spirit to forge new bonds of community and the confident assurance of the call for us as individuals and us as a congregation to be the hands and feet of Christ.

In the best of times – it is a swirl of emotion. And in uncertain times – and yes let's acknowledge we are living in uncertain times – we need to be reminded that we worship a God of hope and possibility; a God who frees those in bondage; who prioritizes care for the most vulnerable, the widow and the orphan, the refugee, those on the outside looking in. I am eager to join you – a congregation who lives and breathes as a church of hope and possibility, of grace and of love – on a journey to be repairers of the breaches in our world.

For this is our calling – to repair the breaches; to restore the streets. To not just imagine, but to know that God is able to transform a world filled with self-interest into a world where people live in community. And to know that we are God's partners in this mission.