

*Shelter from the Storm*

Isaiah 25:1-9

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How many of you like ice cream? What are your favorite flavors? Go ahead and call them out. Ben and Jerry's offered free ice cream yesterday at the Town Center in Corte Madera, last week at Bon Air in Greenbrae, the week before that in Novato, and in case you missed any of these, they will be offering free ice cream next Saturday in Sausalito! Free ice cream! This Ben and Jerry's free ice cream program is sponsored in collaboration with District Attorney Ed Berberian and the Center for Domestic Peace. Here's the scoop: it's simple – turn in your toy guns and violent video games, and you are given free Ben and Jerry's ice cream! The program is meant to highlight Domestic Violence awareness month, which is this month of October, and to promote and create peace in a violence-free environment.

Domestic violence has certainly captured media attention recently with the NFL controversies. The images portrayed in the news media are both forthcoming and deceptive. Forthcoming, because they bring domestic violence into much-needed public awareness; deceptive because they seemingly target a certain segment of the population. Domestic violence, in actuality, cannot be categorized by belonging to a certain race – it affects every race. Domestic violence cannot be categorized by belonging to a certain economic bracket – it pervades every income level. Domestic violence cannot be categorized by belonging to a certain country – it exists in every nation worldwide. Domestic violence cannot be categorized by belonging to a certain religion– it infiltrates every religion. It crosses all professions and education levels. (Domestic violence does, however, disproportionately affect some populations. Women living in poverty, for example who have “fewer options for economic self-sufficiency and social support systems with little ability to offer financial help, feel more trapped in unhealthy relationships in which they are at risk.)

The PADVN (Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence Network) sent out a resource packet to be used by congregations in addressing this pertinent issue. In it, one pastor spoke of a workshop offered at a church called “Owning our Rights,” where abused women and children gather to learn skills and gain support. One woman prayed for her unborn baby, whom she feared had been harmed by her violent husband. This workshop helped to bring hope, to recognize that she is not alone, and that others understand her situation and pray for her. She was encouraged to know there are many women throughout the world who live in similar situations.

Though it was encouraging for her, it is not so encouraging for the condition of our world. According to statistics compiled by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, one in four women have experienced physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner. Three women die each day by a “loved one” who could not control

himself. In the US, intimate partner violence results in more than 18.5 million mental health care visits each year. Though domestic violence obviously includes outward signs of physical violence, what many people don't realize is that it also includes withholding money or limiting financial freedom. It is verbal assault. Domestic violence is hindering access to family and social circles. Domestic violence, also called "intimate partner violence," involves humiliating the victim. It is harassing people via social media, texting, phone calls or emails. Domestic violence or intimate partner violence can be a physical, mental, financial, emotional, sexual or psychological act. In other words, domestic violence is bullying.

The NFL's reaction to domestic violence has drawn some sharp criticism; however, at times the church, too, has failed to address domestic violence in honest, healing ways. Whether by interpreting difficult biblical texts in ways that undermine or damage rather than support victims or by staying silent on the subject altogether, the church at large has been complicit in domestic violence. In a response to a *Marin Independent Journal* article about the NFL domestic abuse controversy, a sidebar showed some responses under the titles "Why I stayed," and "Why I left." One response to "Why I stayed," was "My pastor told me that God hates divorce. It wasn't until later that I realized maybe God hates abuse."

The Isaiah text read today relates to the context of domestic violence, in that a people, the Israelites, were held captive and stripped of their safety and security, torn apart from what was familiar and comforting. The Isaiah passage was likely produced in the post-exilic period of Israelite history, written from the perspective of having endured the violence of captivity and exile from their homeland. *The violence of captivity and exile from their homeland*. One scholar notes, "Israel's captivity and exile point to the infidelity of humanity as a whole and humanity's exilic existence on earth itself, where no one can flee from the sound of terror." We are all affected by domestic violence whether we are aware of it or not. It may be that we experienced the effects as children, or that we experienced or experience it in our own marriages, or that we work with or are related to or lend support to someone who is in an abusive relationship. When the statistic is that one in four women will be in a physically abusive relationship in her lifetime, we are made aware that domestic violence is all around us. We are living in a world of exiles. Of people longing for a safe home.

The passage of Isaiah 25 is one of hope, hope for an end to humanity's universal exile. Walter Brueggeman calls this passage a poem of praise that provides a number of healing images for God:

1. God as a demolition squad (verse 2 – "For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt); This is a God who is powerful enough to destroy the destructive forces in our lives, who can overpower that which threatens to overpower us.

2. God as a safe place (verses 4 & 5 – “For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled); This is a God who always has time, who always has room, whose doors are always unlocked and open for us.

3. God as the host of a grand dinner party (verse 6 – On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines). This is a God who cares for ALL peoples--everyone is invited. Did you RSVP? Will you answer God’s invitation to come to the feast?

4. God as a powerful conqueror (verses 7 & 8- And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples...he will swallow up death forever.) This is a God which even death cannot contain. God has the final say, and God will lift the cloak of darkness and blast in the light.

5. God as comforter, as a gentle mother or gentle father figure (verse 8 – Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.) This is a God who understands, who knows our pain, who cares, who holds us and carries us and sees us through our suffering.

Brueggemann says, “All are images of God who overpowers the threats and gives us a chance in life. Perhaps, if in some part of our lives we want a new chance and we have run out of our own devices, we will resonate and take hold of one of these images. The good news is that newness is not just an act of our own willpower, but is an act that God takes for us.” When we can embrace and call on God as comforter or demolition squad or protector or shelter from the storm we are acknowledging our need and allowing God in. When we allow God in, God is able to move in us, to give us strength and hope, and then, God knows what can happen!

As a church, we are called to rise to the challenge of speaking and embodying God’s good news of freedom and new beginnings in situations of domestic violence. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah when he says at the beginning of his public ministry, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, anointing me to preach good news to the poor, sending me to proclaim release to the captives and the receiving of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Here are some of the things that churches around the country are doing to address the issue of domestic violence:

- Black Mountain Presbyterian Church in North Carolina trained its staff and volunteer leaders in responding to victims of domestic violence; educated its whole membership, the children, the youth and the elders, on the issue with age-appropriate curricula; and committed to “regularly lifting up the issue in worship

and once a year in sermons.”

- The Indianapolis faith-based organization Not to Believers Like Us, Inc., sponsored a conference at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church to raise awareness of domestic violence among faith communities. The conference urged every congregation to develop a “safety team” and “safety plan” for victims of domestic abuse.
- To address a shortage of space in local shelters, King of Kings Lutheran Church in Milwaukie, Oregon worked with other congregations and community groups to create a housing project for women and children fleeing domestic violence.
- United Methodist Men is collaborating with United Methodist Women to increase efforts to end domestic violence. “Domestic violence occurs in lots of homes,” says Gilbert Hanke, top staff executive, “including parsonages.” He believes being a real man means not tolerating attitudes that assume women occupy a lower status.

What could we as a church offer or provide to show our support of non-violence in the home? Ben and Jerry’s offered ice cream in exchange for violent toys and games. Ice cream is their specialty. What is our specialty? Prayer, caring, compassion, outreach, refuge, financial support? The Mission Outreach Committee voted unanimously at their last meeting to donate 25% of the Peacemaking Offering taken today to the Center for Domestic Peace. This is a great start. Let’s keep the discussion going and the ideas flowing.

Amen.