

*Passion for Justice*  
February 5, 2017  
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Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

One day, as he began his daily prayer, a holy hermit saw passing by, a disabled veteran, a mother begging for food for her malnourished child, and the victim of what appeared a very severe beating. Seeing them, the holy man turned to God and said, "Great God! How is it that such a loving Creator can see so much suffering, and yet do nothing about it?" And deep within his heart he heard God reply, "I have done something about it. I made you."

This man in the story is a bit more fortunate than those holy ones described in the Isaiah passage we read today, because he actually hears from God an answer to his prayer. In the Isaiah passage, the people exiled in Babylon have returned to their city of Jerusalem, only to find it in ruins. This is the context of our passage. The temple has been destroyed. They seek help from God by worshiping with the ancient customs and traditions of fasting and mourning in sackcloth and ashes. The holy worshipers in the passage, however, are not acknowledged by God.

They demand to know why they have been forsaken, even though they fast and humble themselves. "Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high," God replies. "You serve your own interests in your worship of bowing your heads, while your workers remain oppressed. You worship by lying in sackcloth and ashes and then squabble and fight in divisiveness." The standard formalities of worship on their own are not going to save them.

In the gospel passage of Matthew, Jesus warns the disciples not to lose their saltiness, not to become useless by forgetting the dispossessed and marginalized among them. Judea at the time was occupied by the Roman Empire, and there were various responses to this by the factions of Jews in the land. They wanted to preserve their religious culture and went about it in different ways.

The Sadducees collaborated with the Romans while the Pharisees fought them; however, there was a split within the Pharisees – there were those Jews who fought outright against the empire and those who retreated to pray and fast in piety. It is perhaps this latter group that Jesus refers to in the passage when he warns the disciples to avoid losing their saltiness or hiding their light under a bushel; when he commands the disciples to have more righteousness than the Pharisees if they want to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Like the salt-less worshipers in Isaiah who fast and then step over the poor on their way out of the temple grounds, Jesus sees the religious leaders in 1<sup>st</sup> c. Jerusalem perhaps overly concerned with correct observance of tradition. Jesus, like Isaiah, claims that righteousness is not about merely performing the proper displays of

piety, but of right relationship with others. Righteousness is about justice. It is about the resultant behaviors that emerge from the religious rituals. The Benjamin Franklin quote on the bulletin cover states, "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are."

How many of you have seen the movie, *Hidden Figures*? How many of you are planning to see the movie, *Hidden Figures*? I don't want to spoil it, but I think there is a crucial scene in the movie that relates well to our passage. Mathematician Katherine Goble Johnson works at the segregated West Area Computers division of Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia in the late 1950s. She is black.

Al Harrison, director of the Space Task Group at NASA hires her to help the mission of sending American astronauts into space. At one point, he becomes upset that she is not at her desk and publicly confronts her in a room of dozens of people, all white except her, as to why she takes repeated 40-minute breaks during the day. "Where do you go every day?!" he yells at her in front of everyone.

Katherine replies that there are no bathrooms for her in the building, and the nearest colored bathroom requires that she walk, or run, quite a distance, several buildings away, up and down hallways and staircases. There is a moment of sudden illumination in the room at NASA. An awareness that permeates their consciousness. Her relentless plight and their enormous advantage are starkly revealed. Their advantage that seemed commonplace until that moment.

In the Isaiah Scripture reading, God says that what he wants from the people is not their performance rituals of fasting, but justice in the land. To loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. To share food with the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked. THEN. God says. THEN your light shall break forth like the dawn, you will have healing and freedom and support and an answer from the Lord.

Stop blaming and hating, and be part of the restoration. Take care of those in need, and then you will have the strength and resources to rebuild your city in ruin. Give to others, and your darkness will look instead like the light of noon. Let go of the personal resources to which you are clinging, and you will be satisfied and strengthened.

To live in the kingdom of heaven is to have a passion for justice. It is the moment in the film *Hidden Figures* when Al Harrison realizes Katherine's oppressive mandate of segregation and marches to the Colored Bathroom with an ax and chops down the sign and abolishes bathroom segregation at the institution. It is the moment when Harrison allows Katherine to be included in the white-male-only meetings and she is able to create the equation that guides the space capsule into safe re-entry.

Hiding your light under a bushel is like practicing empty rituals and waiting for God to respond. God is waiting for us to respond. How do we respond to the injustices in our midst today?

We read the gospel passage about being the salt of the earth and the light of the world in Compassionate Kids this week. When asked why Jesus would say his followers were salt, what did he mean? What does salt do? They didn't really know how to answer this, until asked, "If you have a bowl of popcorn without salt, and then you add salt, what does the salt do?" they said, "It makes it better." Yes. Exactly. Jesus wants his followers, he wants us, to make the world better. How do we do that? Simple one word answer from a 5 year old: Love.

We played a game where we took turns putting on a blindfold and being led around an obstacle course in the room by the others who could see. I think I was the most scared of anyone to put on the blindfold and be led around the room. As the bright lights led me, however, I felt immediately safe and cared for. "There's a pillow there," one would say. "Move a little to the left," another would lead around a big object.

I am happy to report that each blindfolded person made it safely across the room without incident. Because we had bright lights shining, guiding, helping, serving. They were working together and loving being the light for the one in the darkness. The salt of the earth.

The Martin Luther King quote on the bulletin cover reads, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." We cannot conceive of ourselves as separate from all the other people in the world. King says, he cannot sit in Atlanta and think that things in Birmingham do not affect him. We must understand that we are connected to each other around the world.

This is what I love about being part of a church. We come together in love and with love and for love to help make the world a better place for those in need. We are all connected and we need each other.

After the service today we will have a chance to share how Redwoods Church made the world a better place in 2016 as we review the Annual Report. Isaiah invites us to define our success not by worldly statistics but by how many hungry mouths we fill and how many naked we clothe. You will see, hear and read that this church perseveres with this mission in giving. This is an incredibly generous congregation.

In a recent letter from our treasurer, it was noted that the generosity of the church members allows us to fulfill our mission as a place of spiritual development, community and outreach. Yes. This is what the Scripture readings today implore, exactly that: spiritual development, community and outreach.

We will also celebrate with a soup and salad potluck luncheon where we feed each other, and all are invited. This congregation does an excellent job of feeding one another, providing the strength and stamina to go and serve others outside these walls.

I will close by reading a proposed resolution that was voted on yesterday at the Presbytery meeting. Our Presbytery is comprised of the 52 churches along the coast from just north of the Golden Gate Bridge to Eureka. We meet quarterly and this resolution was one of the agenda items yesterday up for discussion.

*The Proposed Refugee Resolution*

*Whereas, the President of the United States, by Executive Order on January 27, 2017, has suspended persons from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen (in essence banning the majority of Muslim refugees) from entering the United States, which serves to further harm those who are the very victims of terrorism, genocide, religious and gender-based persecution, and civil war, and*

*Whereas, this suspension contradicts the very foundations of our biblical faith to welcome the stranger and give safe haven to the refugee, and*

*Whereas, Jesus himself, with his family, began life as a refugee,*

*Be it resolved, the Presbytery of the Redwoods, of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), meeting on this 4<sup>th</sup> day of February 2017 decries any policy that discriminates against refugees by nationality, color or religion, as deeply flawed, contrary to the United States tradition, and immoral,*

*And further, urges the President to rescind this Executive Order and restore the integrity and values of compassion and hospitality essential to our identity as a nation.*

This proposed resolution was read and then discussed, with people standing up to express agreement or opposition. There were voices from both positions. One, for example, suggested we don't take action, and wait and see what happens. Give it some time.

Another stated that if we wait, what is now temporary could go on interminably, that unless we are native or our ancestors were forcibly brought here on slave ships, we are all descendants of immigrants, and if we are silent, we are complicit in this injustice, that we are, in effect, hiding our light under a bushel which is exactly what Jesus denounces in our passage today. The resolution passed with one opposition.

The good news today is that Jesus tells his followers, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Not you *will be*, you *should be*, or you *once were*. You *are*. Let us shine our lights brightly like a city built on a hill, so that all may see God's glory.