

**Making the Crooked Straight: A Savior Who Unbends Injustice**  
**LaGrave Christian Reformed Church**  
**December 13,2020 Livestream Service**  
**Reverend Ruth Boven**  
**Isaiah 42:1-9**

So since our text this morning stands in the middle of the story of God's people, let's remember, like Isaiah does in our passage, the beginning of the story. Isaiah points us to the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: Let's remember that because God made us for life and for joy when the people went into bondage in Egypt, God rescued them, made a covenant with them, and brought them through wilderness into the land of Canaan. They became a nation and were called to bless and be a light to other nations and people. But eventually the unthinkable happened. The Babylonians defeated Israel and dragged them into exile, which meant complete and utter devastation of their political, social, economic and religious life. Everything was different. Everything was turned upside down. Everything they once knew was shaken to the core.

But into such a time as that, Isaiah speaks. And Isaiah's words resonate with us as well. For his message carries the hope of returning home. Of returning to the comfort and peace and shalom of life as it once was. The prophet's words are filled with promise and hope and future.

But Isaiah's words hold something else too. They also hold a critical ingredient to Israel's hoped for shalom. Israel's recipe for returning to a fruitful, joyful life with God requires something they had forgotten before-and that ingredient is justice.

This Advent we have been thinking about making the crooked straight, about smoothing out the rough, broken things in our path, in order to make way for Christ to come. We've looked inward at our own sins and our own fears and affirmed that the coming Christ is the only one who can make the crooked straight in us and shine the light of hope into our own darkest places.

Well, today we expand our focus a bit. We pull back the camera for a broader view, and when we do we can't help but notice the bentness and brokenness of our world too. In the same way that our individual hearts and minds need attention, need help, need forgiveness, need saving, need to be straightened out, the world around us needs that too. The things we put in place as humans, the structures, the way the world works, needs attention and saving, too.

You know, God's salvation has always been about more than just individual hearts. It's about the whole world. It's about God's concern for our neighbors who are bruised and beaten down and bent over by the weight of injustice. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, proposes that "injustice is the outcome of having skewed neighborly processes so some are put at an unbearable disadvantage." Isaiah declares that God cares in particular for every person who, like a bruised reed, can no longer stand but gets crushed down by forces over which they have no control.

Maybe you've heard about what's happened in a rural area of northeast Nigeria. There, for years, hardworking farmers had sort of an informal agreement with Boko Haram, which is a militant group of Islamic extremists. The agreement was that the farmers could tend their fields in peace, as long as they did not report the fighters' presence to the Nigerian Army.

But recently that deal was broken. The extremist group killed somewhere between 40 and 70 Nigerian farmers accusing the farmers of betraying them. "Everything is shattered now," said one of the villagers, 36-year-old Ibrahim Abubakar. Four of his friends were murdered. You see,

the people there are caught in a deadly Catch-22. If they report the militants to the Nigerian authorities, they risk gruesome reprisals by Boko Haram, and sadly they can't rely on government security forces for protection because they long-ago retreated to safer places in Nigeria.

Into such a time as that, Isaiah's words about God's coming servant echo. 'A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.'

Closer to home, Rev Dr Mika Edmondson, tells the story of his own family's experience of racism in this country. Mika is a graduate of Calvin Seminary's doctoral program, a pastor and the author of a book on Martin Luther King's methods of non-violence and engagement with unearned suffering. Edmondson says that like many African American families, his too has been deeply impacted by racialized sin, by the cold wind of injustice, by powers and structures beyond what they themselves have the power to change.

"My grandparents," he says, "were sharecroppers in rural Alabama, where they could never own land, just keep a small share of what they produced. One year they brought in the crop and the gentleman refused to pay them. He just stole their share." And so with no hope for justice, in desperation his grandparents were forced to move and start over somewhere else, somewhere far from life they'd known in Alabama in order to simply keep their family alive.

Edmondson believes that the answer to our longings for shalom and justice are found only in God. He proposes that in the story of Jesus and his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, we see how humans often respond to injustice or the unearned suffering of others. When the temple guards come to arrest Jesus, Peter retaliates with violence and cuts off the high priest's servant's ear. Other disciples see the evil and get as far from it as they possibly can. But Jesus shows a third way. Jesus deliberately engages the evil and the suffering, he moves toward it, he leans in. Jesus does this not to minimize the misery of suffering, but to show that sufferers are so much more than merely victims. Jesus engages the evil and the suffering to demonstrate God's plan to overcome them both-through God's powerful, transforming love.

That's Isaiah's message-that the servant of God will come to overthrow evil and rescue the weary. Not by force or by raising a warrior's cry. But by himself bending under the weight of the cross, and dying, to make the path straight for the weary to come home to God.

I know it's hard for me and imagine, it's hard for all of us to know how to begin to address the structures and destructive forces in our world that cause vulnerable people to suffer. It's seems so huge, so unmanageable, so out of our league.

But Isaiah gives us a place to start. He gives us these words of God, "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand." The God of the universe will reach out his hand to us. You see, in Jesus, in Immanuel, with hair and eyes and skin and fingers, God comes to take hold of our hand. And when the God who has an undying love for this world gets near and takes hold of your hand you are empowered to get near to others and do the same. One of the ways to address the forces of injustice in this world is to get close to a suffering person.

Lew Smedes, in his book, *How Can It Be All Right, When Everything Is All Wrong*, says, "What was wholly unique about Jesus' ministry on earth was how he suffered with others. He certainly suffered from others, from cruelty, mockery, and abandonment. He suffered from hard nails in his soft skin. But what was special about Jesus suffering was how he suffered with others. And here's the good news, Jesus still puts himself into the shoes of any bruised or bent sufferer." Smedes says, "If you want to know who the vicar (or agent) of Christ is, find yourself a hurting human being in your neighborhood. Jesus points to [them] and says: There I am."

Recently, Rev Jonker and I led a memorial service for Dick Gootjes, a treasured member of LaGrave. One of unique things about Dick's life was that when he was child he lived under Nazi occupation in the Netherlands. Not only that, Dick's parents were part of the Dutch Resistance. Their family housed people bent under the weight Hitler's murderous ways, including a young Jewish girl. "Her falsified identity papers said her name was Lies de Graaf. She went to school with Dick's sisters, but she couldn't go everywhere with the family because of the risk, and eventually needed to leave to go further underground. Dick's family endured watching friends and relatives hauled off to concentration camps. They lived with bombs falling on their village, scarce water and electricity and restrictive food rations. In the winter of 1944-45, people came from all over to beg for food, many collapsing in the streets. And yet families like Dick's kept reaching out. Many homes in fact displayed a plaque on which words from Isaiah 13 were inscribed: "Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees." Friends, with the help of the One who took hold of their hands, the arc of the moral universe was bent just a little more toward justice.

It's said that the woman who hid Anne Frank for months in her attic did not want to be called a hero. "I did what I had to do," she said, "because it was the right thing to do...we are all ordinary people...but even an ordinary [person], can in their own small way, turn on a small light in a dark room."

That, I believe, is what God would have us do. Turn on a small light. Come near to someone bent low. Listen well. Suffer with. Take hold of God's outstretched hand and with the other reach out to a neighbor. You may just hear the voice of the One who says- "See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare." Thanks be to God.

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