

Repairer of the Breach

Isaiah 58:9-12, Romans 12:9-18

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Hurricanes – not what we expect! Transition time in a church – not what we expect! Israelites have been in exile 50 years. Certainly, not what they expected. Isaiah listens to God. He speaks to the Israelites after their return from captivity.

They are overwhelmed with a sense of defeat; abandoned by their God.

They had begun to ignore their religious practices in exile – it was difficult to be motivated -- upon their return they began to build the second Temple but their heart wasn't in it. Israel's faith had eroded over time. It had become empty.

Hurricane survivors have to rebuild too. They feel defeated. It's hard for them to be motivated for the work ahead.

Earlier this week I received an email from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. They are looking for donations for their National Response Team, about 100 people, which arrives in Florida, Georgia and South Carolina this week. They have been in Texas too. Their email quoted the same text from Isaiah that we read, "You shall be...the restorer of streets to live in." As mentioned in our announcements, in your bulletin is a request for donations for Hurricane Relief.

Our neighbors need our help. They are overwhelmed by the magnitude of their personal disaster and the plight of their neighbors.

Recovery will take years. The devastation from Hurricane Irma is just starting to be known. We can't ignore the effects of Hurricane Harvey either.

Our neighbors need our help.

This is why Missions are so important to a church. In my brief time with you I have learned your passion for Missions, here at home and abroad, from Coffee Club to Ministry of Hope in Lesotho and many in-between, this church has a strong legacy of mission work. When we, at GSPC, take part in helping our neighbors we become “repairers of the breach,” a “restorer of streets to live in.”

The Jewish community considers the phrase, “repairer of the breach” to mean, **“repairer of the world!”** They believe God has spoken to them in the much larger context of the world. Can we imagine that for this church community? I think that would be one dynamic mission statement for a church –

“Repairer of the world.”

Churches mostly work tirelessly to provide for people in the contexts where they live but the wider world seems like a much bigger matter. Isn't that God's domain?

In the earlier portion of today's text it condemns anyone for fasting to show off one's righteousness before God, if one has overlooked the plight of the poor. If we're honest, we can acknowledge times when our religiosity got the better of us -

we desired others to see how faithful we were; we wanted people to notice our goodness; so we brought attention to ourselves as we served our neighbors.

God is saying something different to Isaiah. God says we need to humble ourselves in a self-sacrificing way. This is what Christ did for us. Lacking humility is a sign we're anxious -- anxious to do something -- anxious to receive God's approval for our Christian service.

God's righteousness has no anxiety -- it's free to engage one another -- to see the other -- and to see the other not as something to be used -- or merely as an object of pity, but as a gift. Isaiah reminds the Israelites and us to see the other -- as a gift!

Seeing others as God's gift sets us free -- free for God's intentions -- not our own.

Free -- means -- generously compassionate -- **unconditionally self-denying - self-forgetting -- self-sacrificing** -- free to see the other and recognize them as a child of God. To be set free is to be able to call upon God, cry for help and hear God say, "Here I am."

God is speaking about a new vision of humanity -- God invites us to receive ourselves and others as gifts. By doing so we discover in our relationship with God is a life that can only be a life together. This church community functions most effectively when in relationship with God, in a life together; a life together with its

members and others, in worship, in missions, in Christian education classes, in fellowship, and in all its other programs that are not done in isolation, but done in community.

God wants to heal the whole creation. When we participate in the whole work of redemption and healing, God's light breaks through the gloom of despair. GSPC's light will rise and any despair we have will be lifted when we engage others in Christian service. Doing God's redemptive work strengthens our bodies and this community of believers becomes refreshed.

As we care about the concerns of others, who are carrying heavy burdens, GSPC is revitalized. We will be renewed, "like a watered garden."

Then, we will be called "repairer of the breach" because we help heal broken relationships and make the streets safe for human dwelling.

We, not God, are the *repairers of the breach*. We, not God, but with God's help, restore the streets to live in. How do we do that?

God says to Isaiah, tell them to stop pointing the finger, stop speaking evil about someone, offer food to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted. I believe we all want the light of GSPC to rise in the darkness such that whatever gloom or hard times you and this neighborhood have gone through will see better days.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in the passage from Romans that we are “called out” of the world. We are “set apart” as a community for a distinct mission in relation to the world. This fits well with the Hebrew understanding that we are to be “repairers of the world.”

Part of transitional ministry work is to know the distinctiveness of this church; who it has been, who it is today, and who it wants to be in the future. That’s part of what we’ll be working on in the months ahead. We look at the norms that guide and the practices that sustain this church community.

Isaiah had a pretty good understanding of the Israelites after their return from exile. I’m just beginning to learn the many facets of GSPC. How you understand your church community is how you’ll relate to the surrounding world. That’s not much different today than when the Apostle Paul was establishing churches a couple of thousand years ago. Churches have always been challenged to name, articulate and live out their faith.

What I do know is that you have established core values on which all the activities and ministries of the church are built. Each one of us has core values too. These core values are the attitudes and behaviors we bring into our daily lives. A central core value of a Christian is that “we love because God first loved us.” We can’t help but love others; it’s in our DNA.

The Apostle's instructions to the Romans give us guidance for daily self-sacrifice: that our love be genuine; that we turn away from evil, and hold fast to what is good, that we rejoice in hope, are patient in suffering while persevering in prayer. These self-sacrifices allow us to live in harmony with one another and associate with the lowly. The Apostle has given us a model for a cross-shaped life and cross-shaped church.

I believe God calls us to a freedom in relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters. The gift belongs both to you and me, but also to others. When we live in harmony with each other, we see the other as a gift from God just as God does. It's vitally important for us to stick together, to stay in relationship with each other and with those we serve, so that our church community, our worship and our missions are not done in isolation, but done as a life together. You shall be called **“the repairer of the breach.”** Amen.