

SHINE

Isaiah 58:1-12

Intro

Our first passage hears God speaking through the voice of the prophet Isaiah and it very much feels like the voice of a parent speaking to His children. Here's why: in the opening five verses we hear God saying to the people, 'is that the sort of faithful living that you think I want from you? Let me assure you, it is not.'

Now there are plenty of places in scripture where the Divine rebuke is offered...and then that's it. We end up being left with the feeling of, 'Ok, so this is what we're not supposed to do. But what do you want us to do?'

Thankfully, this is one of those occasions where the positive action steps immediately follow on the heels of the rebuke. What we hear are examples that still have parallels to today.

These are verses that too many churches need to hear, because too often we, the church, have gravitated toward ways of faithfulness that are to be applied to the individual who is already a part of the community of faith, and types of service that speak to the needs of the church or those who are a part of it. This doesn't mean that these types of faithfulness and service are to be disregarded in totality (for there certainly can be value in both), but if that's all we've got and that's all we're becoming, then we are so missing the boat.

So, yes, hear the rebuke. Then listen to the action steps, and start to dream. The scripture reads this way.

Isaiah 58:1-12

58 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. ³ 'Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice? Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.

Matthew 5:13-20

Intro

Our second passage has Jesus standing firmly with the prophets and the Divine voice that was spoken through them. In doing so he provides for those who have been called to faithfully follow him three illustrative examples of what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. In these examples, we are also able to feel the sort of impact that should be experienced by those who are outside of comfortable walls. The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷ 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

'Shine'

A couple of Saturday's ago I attended the Delaware-Raritan Classis meeting that was held over at Stanton Reformed Church. I know, that's a whole lot of insider verbiage that may mean absolutely nothing to you so let me try and put it into English.

Three Bridges Reformed is a denominational member of the Reformed Church in America. The way that we run ourselves is this way: a group of congregations (usually located within geographical shouting distance of one another) gather together on a regular basis to both make sure that we are all doing the basic nuts and bolts of being church, but also to work with one another so that God's presence is able to be felt in the area that we all serve. The idea is that each congregation is its own ship, and that by sailing with other ships (congregations) that are close by, they are able to more impactfully proclaim the cause of Christ. That's the Classis. For our geographical region (which covers the western part of central New Jersey out to the suburbs of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania), that now entails 29 different congregations. The reason that I couch it with the 'now' is because over the last few months, the classis has seen the closing of two churches, while another has been adopted in. This net loss is emblematic of the declines throughout a large majority of the classis.

Here's what I mean: we know what we are experiencing in our pews. The attendance is down from several years ago, let alone from 20 or 30 years ago when the greater area of Flemington was being built up. And then there is the reality that people who have been an important part of this place for a long time have moved away, and we still mourn those who have died. While we have been able to welcome new members, there is still a drag, a drag on the community of faith in a multitude of ways in terms of the ministry we can do, the energy that we have, and the finances that are available.

So you know: it's not just us. Unfortunately, this drag has become the norm, both in the Reformed Church in this neck of the woods, but also in a multitude of our neighboring churches as well.

So I was sitting in the classis meeting, reading how two churches have closed, how another is on the brink of closing, and how most of our churches are numerically shrinking, and I thought to myself, 'and I am the pastor of one of the churches that is considered by many to be, 'in good shape'.'

You see, Three Bridges is the 4th largest church in the classis, we have some financial reserves, our ministry is viewed by many as quite active and even robust (not my word) and through good stewardship (and this doesn't count the current Capital Campaign) our operating budget is actually \$4000 to the positive since 2011. We are considered, and in many different ways rightly so, one of the healthy churches.

But we've felt it. We've felt that drag that is being felt by everyone else.

That's why over the last six months the Consistory has been very intentional about doing a whole lot of praying, and reading, and discussing, and absolutely making some changes and trying some different activities when they are God-led. We've felt the drag and we have been trying to figure out what God would have us do, and who God would have us be. You have heard some of that thought from me in my preaching, and very specifically in the cover article of this month's Lifeline (shameless plug!). We all know that the era and the culture that we live in is not one where the church simply opens the door, and all the seats are filled (which too often makes us believe that many of the issues are there, really aren't all that big a deal) we know that era is over.

And then these two passages show up.

Now mind you, I didn't go looking for them: they came looking for us (and through the lectionary readings, no less!).

And what do we hear from God both through the prophet and absolutely through His son?

'Loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.' That, 'we are the light of the world. A city built on a hill. That we should let our light (which is God's light!) shine before others, so that they may see and ultimately give glory to God'.

What we hear through the prophet and our savior are reminders of who the church has always been called to be, in good times and in bad; in times of plenty and in times of want; in moments when the resources seem plentiful and maybe even more so in those days when the resources are starting to dry up.

The light that is of God needs to be out there so that the ways that we are able to serve are met, and the people that are in need are cared for. How that is done varies depending on the gifts from God that you have. But they need to be utilized where the needs are, and the needs are not confined to the comfortable confines.

Look, I get it: when the storm gets rough, one of initial actions is to hunker down. We've had enough hurricanes around here so I know you understand the analogy I'm making!

But God declares that those are not the sort of sacrifices that He desires. He longs for us to go out in His name and share His love by serving.

As a church we need to provide more opportunities for us to come together so that we might be able to serve in His name. We will. I'm not sure when...but we will.

Why?

Because we must! Because that is who God created us, as disciples of the risen Christ, to be.

A couple of Saturday's ago I was sitting in a Classis meeting that confirmed for me that the drag that we have been feeling as a congregation is not our own.

This past week our scriptures articulated the vision of who we are meant to be...regardless of the circumstance.

Children of the living God, we are the light of the world. Shine, shine brightly, shine always.

After Sermon Prayer

Lord, throughout the generations, Your people have had moments when they have struggled to live in ways that have allowed Your light to radiate forth in ways that do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with You. We confess those moments in our own lives. However, we have been feeling the storm and we have heard Your Word and we have been reminded that Your light is meant to shine forth in every season. So help us to let it shine and continue to guide us so that we might do so as well as You would have us do. Lord, let it be so. Amen.