

**February 5, 2017**

**TEXT: Isaiah 58:1–12**

**TITLE: Community Beloved**

*By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

*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.*

<sup>2</sup> *Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practised righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgements, they delight to draw near to God.* <sup>3</sup> *‘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. <sup>4</sup> *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.* <sup>5</sup> *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?* <sup>6</sup> *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?*

<sup>7</sup> *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?* <sup>8</sup> *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.* <sup>9</sup> *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,* <sup>10</sup> *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.* <sup>11</sup> *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.* <sup>12</sup> *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.*

New month means a new Journey theme – “Back on Track.” Appropriately so, as we are two months into this new year and are hopeful that attitudes, relationships, lifestyles, whatever it may be, have reset, realigned and we are back to a state of normalcy. That’s why the theme was chosen, it is a theme denoting that no matter how far from shore we may have figuratively drifted, we are now back to normalcy, safe and sound. But nothing is further from the truth – we are not safely back on shore, normalcy has not re-emerged and it seems that there is no safety or soundness in life. Yes, unemployment is down to an all-time low, the number of people who have found employment reached another milestone a few days ago, the Dow Jones reached an all-time high two weeks ago and those who are financially secure are in a position to become even more secure and comfortable. Yet in spite of all the indicators that point to everything being okay, some people are still suffering; some are still without, some are

still hopeless and in despair. And people are still hopelessly divided on the issues of justice and equality.

And along comes the lectionary passage for today, which explicitly illustrates what true righteousness, justice and equality are, what it means to live in a community beloved. It's important for us to understand the backdrop to today's passage. The Israelites have made it back home, returned from Babylonian captivity and the glory of their beloved land and community has been restored and rebuilt. Everything was right with the world, so the chosen people of God are now in a position to truly worship their God. In spite of the fact that their temple still lay in ruins, the people had resumed their outward expressions of worshipping the God of their salvation, the God who had freed them and returned them to the land of promise and prosperity. Things were back on track, you might say.

There is no ambiguity in our passage today. The passage is crystal clear the people's worship was empty, and worthless, it was ritualistic and God was not listening or acknowledging their so called piety. God's prophet was charged to announce to the people that they had gone astray, their worship was hollow, had no spiritual substance, was not transforming or transformative and at best, it was self-serving. Their fasting was of no earthly good, because it did not move them to better the lives of those living among them. Their worship did not honor or glorify God, it did not lead to a community beloved, where all of God's people were embraced, lifted up and made whole. The Lord replied: "You serve your own interests on your fast day."

It's providential that this is the lectionary passage today, because it speaks so clearly into the world we are now living in. A world that seems to be turned upside down. You all read the newspapers, are on Facebook and other social media sites and listen to the news, so I don't need to bore you with the specifics of orders that have been signed, mandates and alternate facts that are being expressed or the general divisiveness that seems to have become even more pervasive, all done in the name of Jesus, with what appears to be the sanction and support of the religious right.

It's not easy to reconcile worshipping a God who declared we are to welcome the alien, feed the hungry, give drink to those who thirst, visit the sick and incarcerated, give our coat to those without cover and give our finances that others might have, with the believers who espouse "build that wall," rescind access to medical care from millions of people, increase interests and mortgage rates for those who are trying to purchase homes, reinstate banking and tax breaks that benefit the one percent of citizens in this country or pray for an actor and his low rated reality show. Where is the compassion, concern and love for the other?

The Lord speaks to the hearts of people through the prophet Isaiah succinctly stating: God's people are called to a social Torah or ethic and this ethic does not conflict with the Torah of Moses, but characterizes a righteous life devoid of disingenuous piety, the exploitation and demonization of those who are different or are in need. A social Torah contrasts the fast of the foolish with the fast that the Lord demands: acts of justice,

liberation and provision for the hungry, homeless and naked, concern for the widow and the orphan, care for the alien and the least of these.

God's people are warned over and over again, it's not enough to talk the talk. They are to walk the walk to bring about equality, justice, peace, respect and provision for all of God's people. We are to live in community beloved, holding all things in common. Jesus, our savior and example walked with and cared for the ostracized, the unclean, the poor in spirit, the have nots, not those in positions of power and authority. He is our example of living a life that is pleasing to God.

Sixty-one years ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King stated in "Facing the Challenge of a New Age: "(But) the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends.... It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men."

We are a people in need of a miracle of the heart, and there is a balm in Gilead that can heal us: when finger pointing and speaking evil cease, when blaming the victim, the innocent and the least of these discontinues, when closing our borders and erecting walls halts and instead we offer food to the hungry, satisfy the needs of the afflicted, welcome the alien and refugee and reconcile divisions and differences, rather than fan the flames of conflict and discord 140 characters at a time. Then and only then shall the promises of God be realized and the righteous will be back on track, shining like a beacon into darkness. Then and only then shall ancient ruins precipitated by institutional and systemic racism, sexism, xenophobia, heterosexism, unchecked capitalism and any other "ism" be rebuilt. Then and only then will the foundation of the many generations upon who's backs, blood, tears and lives this country was built and prospered rise up and be recognized as the children of God also. Then and only then will our worship be acceptable to God as sincere, genuine, transformative and righteous. And then and only then, brothers and sisters, will we be the repairers of the breach, and restorers of the streets in community beloved.

Amen.