

FEB 16, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

February 9 sermon— “Keep On Keepin’ On”

Isaiah 6:1-13

This week I’d like to start out with a story I heard earlier this week. There were 3 wise men tasked with hiding the secret of the crown of life, the secret of true happiness and thriving from humanity. The first said “let’s hide it on the highest mountain top, surely they won’t find it there.” The other two said “you know how persistent they are, eventually they will search it out there.” The second suggested hiding it at the bottom of the deepest sea trench. The other two responded as before. “You know how persistent they are, they will search it out even there.” The final wise man said “hide it within themselves, that’s the one place they refuse to look” and the other two agreed.

We’ll come back to this shortly.

Our passage for today is an entire chapter in Isaiah. It is his call story. In Isaiah’s vision he is called to bring the word of God. Isaiah is hesitant. When he says that he has “unclean lips”, he’s not talking about cursing as we might suspect in our own use of that kind of terminology. He is sharing that he has a habit of talking down about others. He is harsh in his language discussing those around him. He trash talks just as everyone around him trash talks and why on earth would God want him to be a mouthpiece?

The answer comes in the form of a hot coal. Arguably this might be the harshest version of washing someone’s mouth out with soap ever recorded. The point made here is that Isaiah has been forgiven for his past sins of participating in tearing down those around him, and he has a clean slate to move forward with.

Isaiah’s call is so encouraging for you and I. Recently we’ve put out to the congregation a call to answer your individual callings. Where is God asking you to step out and step up in this new year as we strive to forge ahead as a congregation? It will take all of us answering the call to minister is fully and effectively to the community around us.

Sometimes when we feel a pull from God we hesitate. We feel inadequate. Perhaps we feel like we’d be a hypocrite. “How can I do what your asking when I’m flawed? How can I do THIS because I’ve messed up in that area time and time before?” Like Isaiah God has an answer. You are forgiven. You are also empowered with a clean slate and renewed conscience to not repeat the mistakes of the past. In fact our pasts may be exactly why God wants to use us. My past might be my motivation. It might have taught me lessons that will prevent me from making mistakes others might fall into. Particularly in areas like support groups it’s well established that the best people to minister are those who share in a common experience with those struggling. There is an ability to relate that others who don’t share in the experience will never grasp. What you might think is your Achilles heal could actually be your superpower.

What comes next has to be read properly. Read superficially this passage can sound like God is actually causing people to do wrong for the purpose of punishing them. Nothing is further from the truth. Remember last week we talked about the nature of God being love, that any message from God then must encourage the commands to love God and love one another. Expecting God to force someone to be sinful simply doesn’t track. But read the passage with sarcasm and now it makes much more sense. Also ask if they noticed anything in the reading from the screen.

God is acknowledging where they are. They are already refusing to hear, see, and understand. This is why God is angry with them. Most parents understand this frustration. Many of us have uttered to a stubborn offspring something akin to “oh, that’s how you want to be? Keep it up and see what happens.”

Of course God doesn’t want them, or us, to keep on doing wrong. Just like our intention when we make such frustrated comments, the hope is always that the receiver will turn away from the problem behaviors and attitudes.

Why are they having such difficulty in changing? Let's look back to the story from our three wise men. Where does God speak most loudly? From within us. The Holy Spirit speaking to our hearts is that force trying to draw us away from the wrong to the right. Trying to draw us to God through Christ. Trying to get us to break from the trouble of the past and present for a fresh start on the future hand in hand with God.

Looking inside is scary.

Looking inside risks seeing what we don't want to see. It risks admitting we are wrong, and maybe have been for a long time. It risks having to do the hard work of change, and all that means for relationships, habits, values, and life choices.

The pattern that the folks Isaiah would be preaching to was that they would rather keep doing what was displeasing to God than risk looking inside, hearing God, seeing what needed to be done, understanding the importance, and then acting upon it. They didn't want so see, hear, or understand.

So Isaiah asks a question. "How long do I have to keep talking to these hardheaded folks?"

"Until the bottom falls out and they are destroyed. Maybe then the ones left will learn." Keep in mind, the natural consequence of any large group that turns on itself inward and can't get along is weakness. Particularly in the world back then, a world of expanding territory and empires, that kind of weakness had one and only one eventual outcome. Being overrun and overtaken by another power.

Despite their stubbornness, God calls Isaiah to not give up. In a passage that could come as incredibly harsh, there is a bright ray of hope and goodness. God has not given up on them. Not only has God sent a messenger, but this messenger is tasked with being unrelenting in trying to persuade kings and people to turning back to God.

Last week we remembered the story of Jonah. Nineveh was on the precipice of being destroyed but God gave them a midnight hour chance in the prophet Jonah. When Nineveh repented God relented. This is the God we serve! No matter how far go, God is always willing to give us another chance. All it takes is a heart to turn to God and take God's hand to move in the right direction. Which is another way of saying "repent".

The people of Judah and the kings all had this same opportunity that stretched out a long time. Listen and come back to God and things will turn around!

The message to Isaiah, keep keeping on. Keep trying until it's evident by the destruction that the message hasn't been received.

The important thing here is that the messenger trusts God and loves the people enough to keep calling out. And God is loving and patient enough to hope for a miracle of the collective heart so that a terrible consequence can be avoided.

This passage that might seem like 13 verses of doom and gloom is in reality a passage of great hope and calling.

God is calling each of us to something. Whatever your hesitation God can help overcome it, and if it's a feeling of personal defect what you call a defect God might be calling the key to bringing someone lost into the fold

The love of God is so great that the call to return to God's way of doing things over our own is constant. God doesn't give up on us

If we are being called to do differently, looking inside isn't a fearful thing. It is hopeful. It's where we meet God in the heart, where we hear, see, and understand, and where we find the resolve to change. The other side of that is abundant and thriving life

If you are Isaiah working with a stubborn person or group of people, keep on keeping on as long as God is calling. You might be calling a Nineveh on the verge of becoming what God has called them to become.

1 Peter tells us that we are all part of a royal priesthood when we come to follow Jesus. All that means is that we are all intended to represent Jesus to the world, and invite the world into relationship to God through Him. This formula for Isaiah; let God call and use us, know that God never gives up,

grow in faith and action, and keep trying to influence the world around us especially when it's hard or discouraging is the formula for every one of us.

Just as Isaiah was working to bring his nation back to a right way of living and being by reconnecting them to the God they had forgotten, we do the same for our world here, now, today.

The results might not be immediate. The results might not be enormous. But there are results and for those that receive them our work is appreciated and for some not just soul saving but life saving as well. It is the common calling of every Christian. Welcome to the priesthood.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 10

Following David's generosity towards Mephibosheth, we see another attempt at being gracious with a startlingly different result. Nahash the Ammonite king had died leaving his son Hanun in charge. Apparently David and Nahash had a good relationship. This might seem odd as the Ammonites were enemies of Israel.

This hostility might have worked to David's favor before. Running from Saul perhaps he and Nahash had a working relationship. After all, the enemy of my enemy is my friend right? Whatever the case, David wants to show loyalty to the son, Hanun.

This seems to reveal in David a streak of kindness and political savvy. Keep strong relationships strong. Honor those who pass and show regret for that passing. There's no need for trouble where trouble doesn't exist.

Sending some fellows to Hanun to extend kind words and an offering of good and honest dealing with one another in the future, the impression is that there is hope for a good connection. Hanun's advisors see it differently. They are suspicious that David is actually plotting something.

On one hand we might wonder why the suspicion. David is acting in good faith here. Don't forget that David has just finished a significant campaign of expansion, conquering other territory for his own. If this is common knowledge the bigger question is "why wouldn't they be suspicious?" Under this sensibility we have the scene play out ugly.

In a significant insult David's men are sent back half naked and with half beards. Whatever we might think about a beard (why not just shave the other half and not look silly?), in their culture this was obviously a major offense. They save face because David comes to them and extends a mercy. David's concern for his own men is moving. He's king and doesn't have to extend such courtesy. To this point, however, we've seen David had great care for those that follow him. This is just one more instance where that care is extended.

Was this a mistake on Hunan's part? Absolutely. They fairly quickly realize it and reinforce their military anticipating retaliation from David. David isn't one to be trifled with. There is a profound lesson here.

Treat people, even those who may be suspect with dignity. Hunan could have simply thanked them and sent them on their way. He could have even sent people to keep an eye on them as they returned to David. Had he done so he may have found David's offer to be genuine. At least he wouldn't have provoked war. Tempers and knee jerk reactions rarely yield good choices.

On David's part while the offense was unfounded, there doesn't seem to be self-awareness. "Perhaps there's a reason they were suspicious. After all, I've been on a conquering rampage." Nothing of the sort. Just reaction and showing Hanun not to mess with David's men.

Joab is sent with a force to attack the Ammonites. Noteworthy here is that David did not go with them, nor did David seem to ask God's opinion on this campaign. Prior David was always with the men in battle. When he went on behalf of Israel or Judah David inquired of the Lord. Here he does neither. There is no reason given why.

This question comes in the following chapter when he commits adultery and murder. Again he isn't with his fighting force. He is back home with apparently idle time on his hands. We have no answer. Was he too busy with kingly duties? Was he expected to stay back sometimes for safety? Was he getting complacent and big for his britches? Was it some other combination of attitudes? We don't

know. What we do know is that this David is shifting from the David on the run and awaiting his turn at being king.

The battle is pretty swift it seems. Joab and company went to the Ammonite city looking for a fight. They found one. The Ammonites had contracted the Arameans to fight with them. While Joab's force approached the gate the Arameans came in behind them. Not a good place to be sandwiched between enemy forces.

For me the interaction between Joab and Abishai is a good reminder of the closeness of some of David's leadership. They agree to have one another's backs and help out if one side starts to get overwhelmed. These two are brothers. Trust in this kind of situation is paramount and they clearly have it. We know the brothers have fierce loyalty. Their third brother Asahel was killed by Abner a bit ago and Joab revenge kills Abner as a result. Closeness of relationship can be an asset.

The Arameans run and the Ammonites hide back in the city. How do we know this wasn't about conquest? Joab doesn't keep going. They don't pursue the Arameans and they don't take the city. Their point has been made.

The Arameans on the other hand don't handle defeat well. Hadadezer turns up again and instigates a rebuilding of their force, presumably for another fight. David obliges. This time David goes with the men. Again they handily defeat the Arameans so much so that they won't help the Ammonites anymore and are now subject to Israel.

Put in modern context, we see something akin to gang war. You kill one of ours, we retaliate and kill one of yours. Then you retaliate and kill one of ours or worse and so forth. Hunan offends David, David beats up Hunan. Hunan's allies who are beaten reorganize to strike back at David. David wins again.

The back and forth has never been healthy for the people involved. People are harmed needlessly. Still, it hasn't stopped tempers from flaring and tit for tat to occur throughout history. More importantly we are getting an image of David as a king.

He is involved, but more distantly. He is gracious but don't cross him. Perhaps above all, he is in control. He is victorious after victorious. In chapter 11 we see that perhaps the success goes to his head!