

The Work of Healing the World

Isaiah 58:9a-14

Luke 13:10-17

“You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

When I sat down to wrestle with Scripture this week, I could not unread what I had read about a boat that appeared on the horizon 400 years ago, in August of 1619, carrying the first twenty slaves or thirty from Africa to a coastal port in the British colony of Virginia. I could not unread what I had read of the next 250 years of chattel slavery, and of a war fought to preserve an economic system dependent on equating human beings with property to be “mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift or disposed of violently.” I could not unread what I had read of the Great Nadir, the second slavery following the brief period in our history known as Reconstruction, of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 that declared racial segregation—from cradle to grave—constitutional, of burning crosses and lynchings, of attack dogs and firehoses and four little girls killed in a church in Birmingham on Sunday morning. I cannot unread what I first had read as a sophomore in high school of the Civil Rights Act and un-remember the history I have lived since then and so cannot stop wondering whether the work of healing the world of racial injustice begun in my lifetime will be reversed. I cannot forget for an hour on Sunday morning what I know of a nation spending exponentially more incarcerating young black men than educating them, of a nation more and more made sick by the hatred that is White Nationalism—three hate-based mass shootings stopped by remarkable law enforcement officers since El Paso and Dayton, of a political system doing everything it can to hold on to white hegemony. Yet like Austin last Sunday, I am aware that reading and remembering these things on Sunday morning in the sanctuary is likely no less welcome now than it was in late sixth century B.C. Israel and in early first century A. D. Palestine. Then as now, Sunday was for religious ritual, for prayer, for God talk, for rest and not given to the hard work of thinking together, for Christ’s sake, about how we might begin to heal the world we have broken. Isaiah and Jesus beg to differ and, for that reason, so must I. I think it not by chance that the lectionary readings throughout my last summer of preaching have made us do business with the words of justice-crazed prophets and of a pretty irritated Jesus.

Third Isaiah’s words were first addressed to a divided and disgruntled gathering of returned exiles. No longer slaves under Babylonian rule, they took the occasion of their freedom to double down on their observance of the law so as to reclaim their identities as God’s distinct people. Then as now, when your tribe or race feels threatened, hunker down! Reading between the lines of Isaiah’s rant, you can imagine the community spending an enormous amount of energy on being properly religious. Yet everything around them is in ruins—not only the temple but a society whose social fabric is shredded. According to Old Testament professor Paul Hanson,

In a community where those who regarded themselves as the most religious had converted religion into private acts of study and ritual, thereby leaving the entire realm of social relations and commerce under the dominion of ruthless and self-serving exploitation, the prophet reaffirms the classical understanding of [righteousness] that grew out of the experience of God’s liberating slaves from their bondage, feeding them in the wilderness, and giving them a homeland of their own[I cannot unread what I have read]....It is a plea to reclaim authentic humanity by replacing cold, calculating self-interest with acts of loving-kindness that restore genuine communal solidarity.

In sum, the prophet’s response to Israel’s behavior is twofold. First they must heal the broken relationship within the social order: “loose the bonds of injustice [and] undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free and break every yoke.” Second, they must heal their relationship with God: stop “trampling the Sabbath, [and] pursuing [their] own affairs on [God’s] holy day....” Then, says the prophet, “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.”

In Hebrew, the words for repairer of the breach are *tikkun olam*. The practice of *tikkun olam* has its origins in the medieval mystical tradition of Judaism known as Kabbalah whose creation myth goes like this:

When God decided to...make room for creation, He first drew in His breath, contracting Himself. From that contraction darkness was created. And when God said, “Let there be light,” the light that came into

being filled the darkness, and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.... But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They broke open, split asunder, and all the holy sparks were scattered like sand, like seeds, like stars. Those sparks fell everywhere....That is why [God's people] were created — to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden....And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored, and tikkun olam, the repair of the world, awaited so long, will finally be complete.

If we are to be repairers of the breach today, if we are to live by the light of the biblical narrative, writes Rabbi Shai Held, shabbat cannot be separated from social justice. “The Bible’s most fundamental commandments effectively erase this distinction,” he says, “since, after all, how we treat others *is* in a sense how we treat God.” Specifically, the God who brought the world into being and who redeemed [God’s people] from slavery is the God who charged God’s people “to observe Shabbat.” Why? “...so that their slaves will get rest too. Rest is not the privilege of the powerful,” Held adds, “but the right of everyone.” [I cannot unread what I read this week.] Likewise, when Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites worship, saying to Moses, “Why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors! Now they are more numerous than the people of the land, and yet you want them to stop working,” the word Pharaoh uses for ceasing labor has the same root as the word Shabbat! “Thus it is the Egyptian despot who, in the very act of refusing to grant dignity to his workers, ironically introduces the notion of Shabbat that God will soon endorse.”

“Social reform and sabbath observance share a common religious and ethical vision,” Rabbi Held concludes. “A society worthy of receiving God’s light is one that recognizes the inestimable worth of every human being, even and especially the vulnerable and the downtrodden.” So it was on that sabbath, when Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, a vulnerable and downtrodden woman appeared in the sanctuary. Bent over by a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years, Jesus sees her, calls her over and unbinds her from whatever was bowing her down. The leader of the synagogue is indignant and, technically, the leader was right. By the beginning of the first century, sabbath laws prohibited “minor cures” in situations where life was not threatened. The sun would set soon enough! Other interpreters say Jesus was not healing the woman but unbinding her from a spirit that enslaved her. [I cannot unread what I have read!] “Ought not this woman, no less than a bound animal, be set free?” Jesus asks after making a rabbinical argument from lesser to greater. “Ought not this daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be unbound from this bondage on the sabbath day?” Jesus asks. “Is this not the fast I choose,” roars the Lord in Third Isaiah: “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” If the sabbath was established, in part, so that slaves would be given rest, should this not be the hour every week when the work of healing the world of racial injustice is plotted in earnest?

Missing from 1619 is any article about worship and the work of healing the world among slaves in those first 250 years of the nation’s history. If you read the statements recorded by the WPA in 1934 about the religious practices of slaves, you learn that, at most, slaves were given one sabbath in the white man’s church per month. There, according to William Moore, a slave in Alabama and Texas,

A white preacher allus told us to ‘bey our masters and work hard and sing and when we die we go to heaven. Marse Tom didn’t mind us singin’ in our cabins at night, but we better not let him cotch us prayin’. Seems like [we] jus’ got to pray. Half they life am in prayin’. Some take turn ‘bout to watch and see if Marse Tom anyways ‘bout, then they circle themselves on the floor in the cabin and pray. They git to moanin’ low and gentle, “Some day, some day, some day this yoke gwine be lifted offen our shoulders.

But it was the story of “slave doctoring,” in an essay on Jesus’ healing of the bent-over woman that offers a model for necessity of beginning the work of healing the world in the hour of worship. In the first place, “healing [among slaves] happened in the context of a story, a social narrative, a spiritual world.” For instance, when a particularly cruel slave owner died suddenly of smallpox, the slave community understood the sacred meaning of his death through God’s plagues against Pharaoh, understood the moral meaning of his death because sins are punished, and understood the healing power of his death to be their liberation from his hatred. Imagine if scripture and not Fox News or MSNBC or Russian bots interpreted our take on the world we are given to heal? In the second place, healing happened in the context of a community. Instead of isolating a sick person, the community

gathered around the sickbed. “This kind of gathering was ritualistic on plantations due to the incessant violence of the labor system.” After Solomon Northup was severely beaten, he lay in bed bleeding and unable to move. At the end of the day, people “gathered around him and brought him bacon and coffee and consolation.” Imagine if binding the wounds of this violent society became the context for our common humanity? In the third place, prayer empowered slaves and formed a foundation for resistance. “Worship, story, ritual and the communal sickbed became a place of liberation.” What if prayer empowered the church to resist the oppressive and unjust systems of our day?

The work of healing the world begins with the healing that happens when the words of justice-crazed prophets and a pretty irritated Jesus are not unread, when a community gathers around the broken lives of those who have born the yoke of this society’s violence with bacon and coffee and consolation, when our worship of God forms us and reforms us and frees us to fix our eyes on the horizon of God’s future and on him whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. Thanks be to God. Amen.