

A TIME TO REBUILD

Isaiah 58:6-12

September 10, 2023

Everything is broken. At least, that is the sweeping and disconcerting conclusion drawn by writer Alana Newhouse in a piece for *Tablet Magazine*. In her own words, "The central idea [is] that we must accept what is broken beyond repair in order to build our communities and institutions anew." I found the piece captivating and ultimately hopeful, which surprised me given its starting point, which was the harrowing journey to find a diagnosis and treatment for the author's very sick infant child. At one point in that journey, Newhouse remembers a doctor confessing, "I don't know how else to tell you this but bluntly. There are still many good individuals involved in medicine, but the American medical system is profoundly broken."

Everything is broken. Paradoxically, acknowledging this reality might be the best way for us to begin a new program year at Second Presbyterian Church. After all, confessing brokenness is what we do. It is one of our core spiritual (and profoundly countercultural) practices in Christian community. Whenever we gather in the presence of a Holy God, we are aware of how often and how far we fall short of our own call to live holy and faithful lives. *We are broken.* This is true of each of us individually, and it is true of the systems and institutions that we broken humans create. Brokenness is a hallmark of humanity. And so, it is the level ground on which all of us stand together as one. So let's start there.

Everything was broken. That's how the book of the Prophet Isaiah begins—the people of God under risk from within and threat from beyond. The prophet describes it in the first chapter in graphic poetic terms, writing, "The whole head is sick and the whole

heart grows faint...your country lies desolate, and your cities are burned with fire." This is the context in which the prophet begins his God-given task of imagining a different reality. By acknowledging the collapse, the destruction, the desolation, the sickness of the head, and the faintness of the heart, Isaiah clears the way for prophetic imagination—the path from painful present to hopeful future.

This morning's passage, fifty-seven chapters later, describes the return of the exiles from their captivity in Babylon back to the holy city of Jerusalem. But what they find is not what their grandparents left behind seventy years earlier. The city is in shambles. The temple—the house of God, the dwelling place of the Almighty—utterly destroyed. Faith is failing. Hope all but lost. It is not relief but despair that characterizes the end of exile. *Everything is broken.*

So, what is to be done about such pervasive, pernicious, painful collapse?
What is our responsibility in such a time as this?

There is grieving, to be sure. There is a period of looking back and remembering. Many of us will spend time in the coming days remembering the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, and the lament over what was and no longer is. There will be communal sadness over what has been lost. And so there was for the prophet Isaiah. There is grief to be sure.

But there is more. There is another chapter. There is a new beginning. The prophet's task is to intentionally move God's people from immobilizing heartbreak to galvanizing vision. There is a future. Embracing it begins in the defiant act of

imagination. *Nothing is impossible for the God of creation.* And so, prophetic communities dare to imagine another way forward.

We grieve. We imagine. And then, only then, we rebuild. We renew and revive our commitment to what matters most. That's the message of the series of "if...then" statements that permeates Isaiah's prophecy to the returning exiles. If you...then God. So, what was theirs to do? The prophet is clear, the list comprehensive. Share your bread with the hungry. Bring the homeless into your house. Clothe the naked. Remove the shackles of injustice, the pointing of fingers, the speaking of evil. If, if, if you do that...then, then, then God's light will rise, your parched places will be refreshed, your failing strength will be renewed. If we...then God.

I take it from the prophet's words, and the wisdom of a 17 year old from Brownsburg, Indiana¹, that the work of rebuilding is not the result of some grand unifying theory. It's not a strategic plan. It is about intentionally living the way God commands us to live. And so, I take it the work of rebuilding begins in the most basic decisions of individuals—turning away from accusations (finger pointing) and acrimony (the speaking of evil), turning toward our neighbors in compassion and care. When everything is broken, it may seem to us that only powerful people or dramatic systemic change can have any positive impact. But the truth is that rebuilding happens brick by brick by brick, that each of us has a role to play and, yes, a brick to lay.

Afterall, *everything is broken.* We are a deeply divided land, where disagreement has given way to distrust, and even disgust, threatening to fully sever the bonds of commonality that have held us together for centuries. This is no hyperbole, no overstatement. Collapse is the context of our communal life. We read about it. We experience it in our own lives. And then we come in here, and in such a time as this, the

temptation for us in the church might be to withdraw, to turn away, to hunker down, to retreat from the chaos of the world. I hear it from time to time. I hear it from some of you. *Can't you just talk about Jesus and leave the other stuff out?* I hear it. I hear it from some of you. *I come to church to get away from all of that.* I get it. It's understandable. But it would be unfaithful. I am fully persuaded that God calls us to more than sectarian isolationism.

What God calls us to is *Tikkun Olam*. That's the Hebrew phrase. It literally means "to repair the world." The phrase was used by rabbis in the first and second century to describe the role of the faith community. *Tikkun Olam*—to repair the world—points to the notion that we bear responsibility not only for our own moral and spiritual welfare, but also for the good of the society at large, especially for those at greatest need.

We are called to repair the world. And if that call feels overwhelming or intimidating...*good.* You're beginning to grasp its meaning. The work of justice, compassion, peace, love is difficult at any age, in any context, and in our time of disconnection and division it may be harder still.

And so, we need to trust that the promise voiced by the prophet is true for us as well. Listen one more time. If you stop pointing your fingers, if you cease speaking evil of each other, if you give your food to the hungry, if you satisfy the needs of the afflicted... then God will guide you, the Lord satisfy your needs, make your bones strong, you shall be like a refreshing, watered garden. Isaiah says that God's people will be called repairers of the breach.

And so, I wonder, what if this phrase was the animating force of the Christian movement in our time? What if we adopted as a slogan words straight from our holy text?

¹During the Word with Children, Rev. Henry shared the story of taking his sons to see the Lego exhibit at the Indiana State Fair. They asked the builder of a giant Lego city how long it took (a whole year) and how he got started. He stated he started with imagining the city, then began building brick by brick.

The Church:

We repair what is broken.

We restore community.

We insist on seeing the image of God and the spirit of Christ in all whom we encounter.

We live not for ourselves, but for Christ who died for us.

You see, the world will know we belong to Christ not by the cleverness of our message, by the arguments we win, the points we score, the opponents we crush, the purity we maintain, or the power we acquire.

They will know we belong to him by the way we love.

That's all.

The tears in the fabric meant to weave us together are so easy to find. Distrust and division imperil every movement toward the common good we might pursue. There are threats of violence and lack of decency driving us further into fear and enmity. This moment demands a courageous faith rooted not in human power but in the sovereign grace of Almighty God. So, let that grace be the fuel for a movement of reconciliation, healing, and repair. It's time to rebuild.

I have mentioned before the interesting and sometimes disquieting subject lines of emails that I receive. You seem to enjoy those, so here's one more. *Before* a recent sermon on faith and politics, an email was titled, "Bad Idea." Fair enough. Way back in April, an email arrived from a longtime member of the church with the subject line: "Protest Sign?" I gathered my strength for a testy exchange, particularly given the pressures of the last three years. The text of the email reads: "Entering 7700 N. Meridian Street, I see this sign. Look, if Second is going to protest, why don't we focus on world hunger or war or pollution. Let's shoot higher next time." The attached picture was of something you've all seen. The orange sign in our driveway. *End Construction*. Now, while I imagine many of you who have had the pleasure of driving up or down Meridian this summer would endorse that movement, I think that sign

gets it entirely wrong. This is not the place where construction ends. It is the place to begin rebuilding.

So, what if we did something truly radical? What if we stood in the rubble of collapsed community and failed institutions and we imagined a different way of being? What if we made the bold decision to disengage from an endless cycle of rage and retribution? What if we divested from the anger industrial complex? What if we stopped majoring in the minors—pointing fingers and speaking evil of each other? What if we confessed the brokenness that is within us and around us and part of us?

And then, what if we simply started over?

Everything may be broken, but, you see, this is the great gift of faith—faith in something bigger and more powerful than ourselves. It is the promise that we can always begin again because God is never finished with us. It is as true for individuals as it is for institutions. We can start over. And, when we do, the prophet declares, "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; then you shall cry for help, and God will say, 'I've been here all along.'" For the Spirit of God is always waiting to respond to our heartfelt prayers, our faithful action.

And so, my friends, this year, let us be committed.

Let us be courageous. Let us be kind.

Let us show a better way.

Let's do this.

Let's lead a movement toward reconciliation.

Let's launch a revival of compassion.

Let's spark a renewal of civility.

Let's repair what is broken.

Let's pray and work for the restoration of the streets in our city, and our relationships, and our hearts, and our land.

And let it begin here. Let it begin now. Let it begin with us.

Let's rebuild. It's time. Amen.