

“The Light We Bring”
January 15, 2023
Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:35-42

In 1630 a Puritan lawyer named John Winthrop delivered a sermon to his shipmates as they made their way across the Atlantic from England to establish what became the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The sermon was titled “A Model of Christian Charity” and famously used the phrase “a city built on a hill” to describe the community they were hoping to create. That phrase is a reference to a verse from Matthew’s gospel when Jesus tells his disciples, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” I’ve always understood Winthrop’s use of that term to mean the Puritan colony was to be exalted and dominant. But if you read the sermon he actually uses it as a warning. He tells them in effect, “the world will be watching us, so we have a responsibility to be a fitting example of God’s glory.”

The idea that God’s people are charged with a special responsibility in the world lies at the heart of Isaiah’s words as well. Isaiah is speaking to a people who are still in exile, people who have little more than faint memories or just stories about Jerusalem. He gives them hope that one day they will return to Israel and God will do great things through them. This passage is what’s known as the “second Servant Song of Isaiah.” Scholars debate over the identity of the servant being described, whether it’s the prophet himself, some future prophet or maybe a king, or if it’s about the whole community. This one seems to refer to all the people: “He made me a sharpened arrow and concealed me in God’s quiver, saying to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I show my glory.’” So, it sounds like the prophet is taking on the persona of the nation.

And they have a special responsibility. It’s not enough that they exist only for themselves—“to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the survivors of Israel”—rather, God will make them a light to the nations. And again, much like Winthrop’s words, it’s not to elevate Israel but to extend God’s salvation “to the end of the earth.” It is a humbling and daunting commission.

I suspect Winthrop didn’t anticipate the Massachusetts Bay Colony would ever become part of a whole new country in the world. He wanted to create a community that was formed through certain principles and values. Values I think most of us would admire. At one point he lays out the behaviors they’re called to practice: “We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.” That was the light he believed this colony could bring to the world, a way of living that bound them together for each other’s sake. But what he may not have known was in another English colony just down the coast in Virginia, the seeds of destruction were already sown. In 1619 the first wave of enslaved people arrived on our shores from Africa and the light the colonizers might bring was extinguished.

That may sound dramatic to some of you, but the introduction of slavery to our country had a profound impact on our moral center. One we're still trying to understand and correct over four hundred years later. Winthrop was right to warn his shipmates that the world would be watching. It's still watching and we still have a responsibility to face our history honestly and do what we can to repair what's damaged. We still have light to bring, for our own sake and the world's.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and Tuesday has been designated as the National Day of Racial Healing. I read an interview yesterday morning with Mayor Byron Brown about the past year, and of course the most traumatic event our community's been through was the massacre at Tops supermarket on Jefferson Avenue in Buffalo on May 14th. The shooter has claimed his reason for committing that atrocity was "to protect the white race." That's the legacy of our history of slavery. Most would agree that we've made great progress in becoming a more equitable society over the last 60 years or so, but ironically it's just that progress that can motivate hate-filled people to commit horrible acts of violence.

In an essay titled "An Experiment in Love," King wrote about the power of *agape* love to overcome the hatred of racism. That type of love is sacrificial in nature, it's not sentimental or romantic. Pursuing it in his work led him to the practice of non-violent resistance against the efforts of leaders in the South to enforce restrictions on Black people registering to vote or engaging in commerce in their communities. That form of resistance was seen by some as too mild and humiliating. But King was convinced it was the only way to bring real change without replacing one form of violent oppression with another. He was convinced, as our sign outside reads this week, "hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." In his essay he writes, "If he is opposing racial injustice, the nonviolent resister has the vision to see that the basic tension is not between races. As I like to say to the people in Montgomery: 'The tension in this city is not between white people and Negro people. The tension is, at bottom, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is a victory, it will be a victory not merely for fifty thousand Negroes, but a victory for justice and the forces of light. We are out to defeat injustice and not white persons who may be unjust.'"

King understood, perhaps better than any person in our country in the last century, that the role of God's people is to bring light to the world. In bringing light we not only reveal a way of living that meets violence and hatred with justice and compassion, but we also shine a light on realities too many want to ignore. We shine a light on the reality of our history, a history deeply entrenched in racist fear that has driven economic and educational, housing and health policies for too long. We have a light to shine in our society that can bring to awareness the inequities that exist and can help us see possibilities for healing and reparation that are long overdue. Just like the people of Israel, it's not enough that we live only for ourselves; it's not enough that the church survives or even thrives, if we aren't bringing the light of God's compassion and justice to our society and insisting that we not turn away from the realities of injustice that persist in spite of the progress we've already made. There's more to do. There's always more to do.

What I find astonishing in this passage from Isaiah is God's capacity to see potential in a ragtag gathering of exiles who've lost their hold on power. Or in John's gospel how Jesus can be approached by these uneducated curiosity seekers and recognize a depth of possibility they would never have seen in themselves. I'm struck over and over by this image of God who continues to invite and cajole and coax people into their deepest, truest selves. With all the sadness and pain we inflict on one another it can be hard to remember that we're meant for more than this. There lies deep within us the capacity to be just, to be loving, to see beyond our fears and insecurities and embrace one another with joy. God sees that in us! And God calls us away from darkness and into the light, where we belong, where we've always belonged.

I doubt John Winthrop and I would have seen eye to eye on many things. But we would be in agreement that God looks to us to reveal compassion and love in the world. God looks to us to be willing to cooperate with God's purposes. God looks to us to bring light and lead the world out of darkness. There is work to do and light to shine; may we be the servants God seeks to reveal God's healing in our broken world.

Amen