

“Shine the Light of Hope”  
December 31, 2023  
Scripture: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40

Recently a candidate for the presidency, or a candidate for a party’s nomination rather, was asked at a town hall meeting what she believed was the cause of the US Civil War. Her response was, frankly, a little embarrassing for someone with her background. It was an actual word salad that sort of meandered all over the topic using the word “freedom” repeatedly. And of course her opponents were duly shocked by how uninformed it was, but I notice none of them seem too interested in giving their views either.

What was so glaringly missing in her response was the word “slavery,” which was the overwhelming cause of our country’s Civil War. In fact, if you read the Declaration of Secession from South Carolina that launched the War you would find it is the sole reason that state decided it must secede. I bring this up because it’s such a clear example of how a country’s past trauma can shape its identity. It’s been 160 years since the end of the Civil War, yet we are still arguing over what it meant at the time and, as the candidate in the town hall later claimed she was trying to articulate, what it means for us today.

I can’t think of a more significant trauma in our country’s history than the Civil War. For a lot of us it might feel like ancient history but as a society we are still struggling with its effects. We are still trying to unpack what the legacy of slavery, though it’s been abolished for 160 years, says about us and our values. That trauma, not just the War itself but the institution of slavery it was fought to eradicate, defines our country in some fundamental ways.

The effects of trauma, whether it’s personal or societal, are passed down one generation to the next. We know this instinctively in our families. Anyone who’s done a genogram, an examination of their family history, can trace certain behaviors that have been instilled generation to generation. Sometimes of those behaviors are admirable, such as a love of reading and education or of music and the arts or of integrity in business dealings and prosperity. But there are other behaviors that are self-destructive, a sense of unworthiness or feeling predestined to failure. We carry all of that within ourselves, if we’re willing to look deeply enough, and we carry it as a society.

I think it’s that reality that lies behind Isaiah’s words in this section of his book. We heard just the very end of a chapter that begins with some familiar words: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning; the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

Listen to those words, the contrasts being made. Isaiah is speaking to a people who feel broken, a people who are grieving. They're still suffering from the effects of exile, even though by this time they've been back in their homeland for possibly decades. They have been defined by their humiliation, and they're afraid anything they do will only lead to failure. It's caused many of them to give up entirely, to collapse with a faint spirit; and it's caused others to be defensive and harsh. Some of the leaders want Israel to close ranks and purify itself. They're implementing policies to cast out foreigners and breaking up families. The national trauma of exile has driven them to behave in destructive ways. In their desperation to prove themselves worthy of God's love they're doing immense harm to one another. They've lost the capacity to hear good news, to shine the light of hope.

Isaiah's words are that light. In effect he tells them they are no longer captive to their past. God sees them more clearly than they can see themselves. When Isaiah says, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness," he's not speaking as himself. In those words Isaiah becomes the avatar of Israel; he takes on the identity of the whole people. And so he's offering them a new way to think about themselves. They're no longer a humiliated, despairing people. God offers them the possibility of transcending their history.

And you notice, it's entirely free. This is an expression of God's love and compassion for Israel. There are no strings attached. God determines to lift up Israel in spite of their past, in defiance of it. "For Zion's sake," says God, "I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest... You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God." The light of hope will shine for Israel and they will be made new.

That promise is what motivated Simeon and Anna in the temple. They went day after day, we're told, waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. They see it in the form of a week-old baby brought like anyone else in his mother's arms. Luke makes a point of emphasizing there is nothing unusual about this visit to the temple. Mary and Joseph are just doing what everyone does when they have a newborn. Lately we've been watching different versions of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and he makes a point at the beginning of his story that Jacob Marley is dead; dead as a doornail. He writes, "There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate." I think Luke is doing something similar when he goes into how the parents are doing all the normal things when they go to the temple. There's no angel visiting them, telling them what to do. So, there's no outward reason for Simeon to react the way he does.

He rejoices because he's waiting for it. He's looking for the light of hope. Simeon and Anna are special because they are not bound by their society's history. In spite of Roman occupation and the trauma that inflicts, they are looking for hope, and they see the light when it appears.

What these readings together tell us is there is a consistency in how God moves in the life of Israel and in the world. When we are open to that movement, when we allow ourselves to let go of past failures, to stop structuring our lives by them, then we can begin to see the light of hope shine. To do that, to truly change our lives personally and collectively, we have to face the past honestly and admit the harm we've done to others and ourselves.

That gets us back to that town hall meeting last week. What we heard in the candidate's response, I think, was an inability to face the past honestly. Until we can do that as a country, until we can admit the sin of slavery and how it's shaped our society through systemic racism, we'll never find our way to healing and shine the light of hope.

You know, we don't really know how Isaiah's society received his words. We don't know if they made significant changes to their behaviors to pull themselves away from the trauma of exile. But we do know they hung onto his words. Even if they couldn't fully embrace them and be molded by them, they cherished them. And I think that realization can shine the light of hope in our lives. We may not ever fully live up to our ideals of equality and justice as a country but we cherish those ideals and if we can face our past with honesty and integrity, with a real desire to repent and change our course, then the light of hope will shine in us. We are not prisoners of our past; we can be liberated and healed.

And maybe a new year is the right time to commit ourselves to an honest look at who we are. As we enter 2024 we'll be faced with many attempts to gloss over the realities of our society in favor of some mythical version of who we are. We'll be encouraged to ignore our trauma, what we've endured and what we've inflicted. But if we can resist those efforts and insist instead on having hard and honest conversations, then the light of hope will shine through us and we will move a bit closer to becoming the crown of beauty God intends us to be.

I'd like to close with a prayer composed by the great mystic and theologian Howard Thurman. Let us pray:

God, Grant that I may pass through the coming year with a faithful heart. There will be much to test me and make weak my strength before the year ends. In my confusion I shall often say the word that is not true and do the thing of which I am ashamed. There will be errors in the mind and great inaccuracies of judgment. In seeking the light, I shall again and again find myself walking in the darkness. I shall mistake my light for Your light and I shall drink from the responsibility of the choice I make... Though my days be marked with failures, stumblings, fallings, let my spirit be free so that You may take it and redeem my moments in all the ways my needs reveal. Give me the quiet assurance of Your Love and Presence. Grant that I may pass through the coming year with a faithful heart. Amen (Howard Thurman—*Meditations of The Heart*)