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Leadership and Justice

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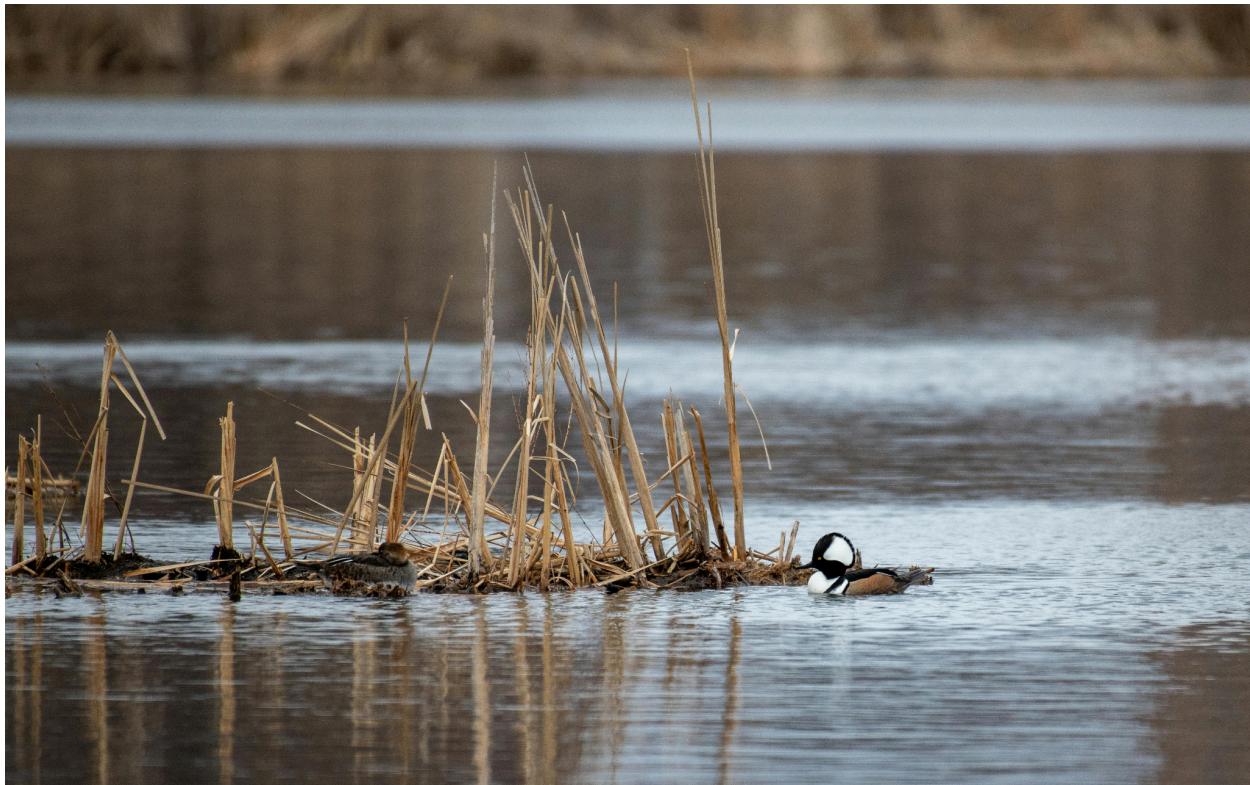


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Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing unto you, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Sermon

The news we've watched on our TV screens and on our phones, in our newspapers, and everywhere else has perhaps left us a bit numb. It's so unbelievably believable that a woman could be killed as Renee Nicole Good was. And for most of us, it has

left us with a heightened sense of shock and anger. A new term, "absolute immunity" leaves us searching our memories for any such possibility mentioned in our civics classes even though we know it's not there.

Our hearts are breaking and we want answers and change, but the change keeps coming like a snowball gaining size and picking up speed rather than a shift toward process and justice.

In our own community, we are well aware that immigrants live in fear. And even citizens who do not fit the majority profile fear that their rights will be denied.

Is this what leadership looks like?

The ancient nation of Israel who received the words of Isaiah were also feeling overwhelmed and confused. They were a fractured community who had actually been captured by the Babylonians. They were barely scratching out a living. Into this setting, Isaiah delivers a vision of a very different kind of leadership.

Theologian Stephanie Paulsell begins her commentary on today's passage from Isaiah by saying this:

In the first of the Servant Songs that shine out of Isaiah, the prophet offers a portrait of the kind of leadership we should expect from one called by God: patient, nonviolent, merciful. God's chosen does not "execute justice" by force. Indeed, this is a portrait of tender care—for those who are vulnerable, for ideas still coming into fullness, for small efforts struggling to plant their roots. "A bruised reed he will not break," Isaiah says, "and a dimly burning wick he will not quench". True leadership protects what is weak until it is strong enough to stand, and keeps gentle hands cupped around a weak flame until it can burn on its own. In this way, Isaiah says, the Servant "will faithfully bring forth justice".

She goes on to talk about how unthinkable it is to have someone candidate on a platform that centers caring for the bruised reed and tending to a dimly burning

wick. That such leadership would be seen as weak and even self defeating. But Isaiah disagrees. Isaiah says that this is a strong model of leadership. It takes patience and consistent work to do the work of justice in order to fan good ideas into flame.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr famously said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

Congresswoman Shontel Brown of Ohio says, "Like many of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous quotations, these words echo through the ages. They offer hope and give rise to a sense that progress toward freedom, equality, and—indeed—justice is inevitable.

But the arc of the moral universe is anything but. It does not bend towards justice on its own—no, it only does so because people pull it towards justice. It is an active exercise, not a passive one."

This passage in Isaiah is a call to us. Those who are called by God are called to make a difference in the world.

If we're honest, I think many of us wonder what difference we can possibly make. In the face of the injustice and inhumanity we see, how can we make a difference? How do we even go about trying to be involved.

Those involved in the work of anti-racism are regularly faced with this question. It has been said that for every year of institutionalized racism, it takes ten years to unravel it. So those who work day in and day out in the work of anti-racism know that they will not live to see the conclusion of the work to which they have pledged themselves.

That does not, however, mean that their work is not critical or that their work is not necessary or worthwhile. No, their work is exactly what is so needed to begin untangling the societal webs that support and uphold the racism in our system...some blatant and some very subtle.

The fact that they will not see the conclusion of their work does not mean their work is not important at all. It is critical.

And so is ours. So is ours.

There is a quote from author T.S. Elliot in one of his poems in the Four Quartets where he says, "For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business". The context for his quote is about writing. He is saying that for authors and poets, theirs is to write the words and craft their poems. What meaning others take from them is not ultimately for them to decide.

Perhaps the same is for us. Perhaps for us, it is most important that we do the work. It is almost certain that nothing any individual among us will turn the tide of injustice. But together, we can create increased resistance. "For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business." I think it's another way of saying that the call upon us is to remain faithful to the One Who calls us and to remain faithful to the work to which we are called. That of bringing justice. Opening the eyes of the blind. Bringing prisoners out of the dungeon.

But what do we do? When our leaders aren't protecting the weak flames or the bruised reeds, we have to step in. But it doesn't seem that simple, does it? How do we do it?

You heard Di talk about some of the ways that Southmin has been involved. And many of you have participated in some of those ways. It can be walking our neighborhoods during school drop-off and pick up to keep kids safe as they come and go from school while their parents stay at home for fear of being picked up by ICE.

It might be working with the schools to provide food for those same families that fear going to the store.

Some of our clergy have participated in protest events coordinated by Together Lab. Together Lab does sacred organizing and does so with deep awareness and preparation. They have also trained people to bear witness when immigrants are

brought to court. They seek to bear witness and protest with awareness and acknowledgement of the risks and cost and encouraging people to weigh the cost in order to choose their kind of involvement.

I want to end by sharing a memory that has been going through my mind over this week. This one inspired by a passage from a different prophet, the prophet Amos. Amos lived in the 8th century BCE and, in contrast to Isaiah's audience, he lived in a time when the Kingdom of Judah was in a time of high prosperity but spiritual decline. He delivered his message of judgment against the elite's [social injustice](#), [greed](#), and [neglect of the poor](#).

The verse I've been thinking about this week is, perhaps, the most well-known verse from the book of Amos, having been famously quoted by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The verse says, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

I had memorized this sometime in college and as a young adult found myself living and working in East Africa. One long weekend I traveled to Uganda with a group of college students where we camped on the banks of the Blue Nile. One morning after the morning mist cleared, we hitched a ride in a canoe down to a waterfall that was along the side of the river. The waterfall was big enough to be exciting, but not so big that it was completely unsafe. And the waters poured right back into the Nile. The college students I was with joined some local kids who were jumping down the waterfall, holding empty jerry cans for floatation..

A bit more cautious, I sat on the rocks at the top of the waterfall and this verse came to mind. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Clearly the image has stuck with me over the years. And this week I've found it rolling around in my head as a prayer. It's not at all clear to me how we get there, but I'm not at all sure it was clear to the prophet Amos either.

But that's our cry. It's the kind of leadership we long for. And not seeing it at the top, it's the kind of leadership that we want to be a part of in whatever role it is to which we might be called.

This week and over the time to come, let's look for leaders who are doing the important work. Some here in our neighborhoods, some leading vigils and peaceful protests and efforts to bear witness to hard things in Portland like Together Lab. Others quietly working to tend to weak flames and bruised reeds to bring protection and healing and empowerment. Because wherever justice is trickling, we want to be part of turning that trickle into a bigger and bigger ever-flowing stream.

Amen