

What's Love Got to Do With It?

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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Opening Prayer

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

Sermon

If you were here last week, you may realize that the title of my sermon is a reflection of what I shared last week about being challenged when it comes to coming up with sermon titles. So this is a nod to Tina Turner and the 80's, but if I'm honest, it's probably a good question to ask about every sermon. So why not use it as a title?

If you were here last week, we talked about taking some time to center ourselves. Reflecting or meditating on a scripture or on your Star Word (we still have them if you haven't gotten one and would like one to ground and guide you through the year), or finding other ways to do some spiritual self-care.

This week, along with over 170 other clergy, I attended a State-wide clergy briefing. This was an opportunity to hear from community organizers about statistics and trends they are seeing around immigration issues in our state. I want to tell you a bit about it because I think it is relevant to our passage today. And because we are a congregation concerned with how *all* people are treated.

The clergy who gathered were varied. We were Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Jewish, Bhuddist, Muslim, and more. We were old and young and in between. We were various genders. We came from urban, suburban, and rural settings.

And we were all there because we care. We care about our neighbors. We care about people who feel the need to be invisible. We care about power that is out of check. We want to be people who stand in the gap for people feeling under threat.

As we started our time together, one of the facilitators led us in a moment of reflection and grounding. To find our center as we waded into information that was disturbing and overwhelming, but sadly, not surprising. We ended our time in a similar manner. Taking a moment to recognize how we were feeling and sharing that with a word or phrase in the Zoom chat.

The leader used a phrase that perhaps he coined in the moment. Spiritual hygiene. I love that. Hygiene is necessary to health. And I think some form of spiritual hygiene—even a moment of reflection and grounding—grants us needed spiritual health and strength to face the challenges of our days.

During our time together, the leaders talked about what they are seeing and how it relates to the rise of imperialism or the decline of democracy. As we look at our passage, the times were perhaps somewhat similar at least in feel. There was no democracy in the ancient near east, but there were kingdoms that were ruled with more justice and those that were ruled with less justice. There were those that sought out the good

of the people and those with rulers who existed for kingdom expansion, power grabbing, and self-exultation. There were times of peace and times of tumult.

At the time this book of Isaiah was written, it was definitely a time of tumult. The people of Israel existed as two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. And the two were not on good terms. But outside of the Jewish nations, they had an alliance of sorts with the Assyrians, but that was unstable and power was shifting between the Assyrians and *their* enemies.

I imagine that every day the people to whom Isaiah was writing would wake up, check their preferred on-line news sources on their phones, and read them in hopes that today would be the day there was some good news. Today things would be different. Today the tide would have changed. But every day that hope was met with a reality a bit more unbelievable than the reality the day before.

We can relate, right? We were angered when we heard the news and saw the videos of Renee Good in Minneapolis. And then to hear of the agents ending the life of Alex Pretti—a nurse by profession. This is how people like us who are protesting how immigrants are being treated...are being treated.

Dr. Stephanie Paulsell, professor at Harvard Divinity School, says that as Isaiah worked in the darkness of cruelty and

oppression, he imagined and proclaimed that the light of God's face would again shine on the people of Israel. He seemingly says, "Do not be afraid! Do not give up!"

Do not be afraid.

It hasn't been long since we heard those words in worship: Do not fear. It's what the angel said to a man struggling to make sense of his young betrothed seemingly having betrayed him. It's what an angel said to a young woman who found herself pregnant, knowing soon everyone would look askance at her and, best case scenario, talk behind her back about her lack of morals. Or maybe she would be stoned. It's what an angel said to Zechariah when the angel appeared to him to tell him his wife, who was of advanced maternal age, was with child.

Do not be afraid.

Dr. Paulsell goes on to say that as Isaiah talks about people seeing a great light and the light shining on the people, he is reminding us of the importance of imagination and the capacity to see beyond things as they are and to imagine things as they might be. He reminds us not to lower our sights, not to get comfortable with the status quo, and not to be satisfied with anything less than the release of those held captive, the end of war making, and the lifting of the burden of oppression from all peoples everywhere.

We're still in the shadow of epiphany when we remembered how the star led the magi to the baby who is the light of the world. And this passage is calling *us* to be light.

Isaiah goes on beyond this passage to say, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

The end of the earth. Gaza? The end of the earth. Ukraine?

The end of the earth. Venezuela? The end of the earth.

Minneapolis? The end of the earth. Portland? The end of the earth. Vose Elementary?

We're not called to bring Americanism or empire, but light. Hope. Joy. And we're called to keep our sites high and our goals divine-sized. We need to have Huge Goals and take small steps. For you kids, it's kindness to classmates and keeping an eye on those who are lonely. It's trying to include classmates who aren't naturally included. It's making Kindness Kits for Blanchet House.

For adults it may be calling your government officials or sending them postcards telling them your concerns about upcoming votes and how you hope they'll represent you. You can download the 5 Calls app to make it easier. It may be participating with your resources and/or your feet in the numerous options through the Mission and Social Justice

Committee. It may be making sure your neighbor is okay. It may be getting involved in ways you haven't before.

But part of light is also love and joy. Because, as it turns out. Love does got a lot to with it. And making room for and choosing to create joy when people in power want you to stay in fear, is an act of resistance. So let's find ways to be joyful.

In verse three of today's passage, it says, "you have multiplied the nation". One commentator says a better translation of the hebrew would be "you have emboldened the nation". We are to act as those emboldened. This is echoed in I Timothy when the apostle Paul says, "for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

So let's find ways to be powerful. To be loving. To resist and also to create joy for ourselves and others as part of our call. Amen.