

WHAT PREVENTS ME?

Isaiah 56.1-7 / Acts 8.26-40

April 29, 2018

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Isaiah 56.1-7

Thus says the LORD:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

Happy is the mortal who does this ...
Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
'The LORD will surely separate me from God's people';
and do not let the eunuch say,
'I am just a dry tree.'

For thus says the LORD:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to the Lord, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be Lord's servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

WHAT PREVENTS ME?

“Welcome to the house of the Lord” and “My house,” Jesus says quoting Isaiah, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.”

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I have been saying since Easter that the difference between the way Christians have historically understood resurrection in the West and how it is understood by Christians in the East is simply this: In the East, resurrection is not the rising of *one* person; it is the *uprising* of *all people*. And the image they use for this is that Jesus breaks into the kingdom of death and smashes all the locks and throws away all the keys and sets everybody – all of us – free! Resurrection is *anastasis* – *upr/ising*.

It’s not about what you think you believe or what you think you don’t believe. It’s about participating in an uprising of all humanity that is already going on.

I’ve heard from some of you that Easter isn’t really your favorite season in the church year. Advent and Christmas is alright. But Easter seems like being forced to believe something that doesn’t make sense to you.

Well far be it from me to try to force you to believe anything. But what if our sisters and brothers in the East are right and resurrection isn’t about what you believe as much as it is about your willingness to participate in an uprising of freedom that is already underway?

And before you commit, you might ask what that kind of uprising looks like? And we have these stories in the book of Acts that give us clues.

Acts 4. Those who are participating in this uprising sell everything they have in order to make sure everyone has what they need.

It’s a different way to understand how we belong to one another and the world – that belonging isn’t about *ownership*; it’s about *relationship*.

It's about freeing ourselves from the possession of possessions and about freeing the people who are enslaved by that deadly power we call "poverty."

Whatever else this uprising looks like, it has this economic component that puts us on the side of justice and calls us to stand against the kind of naked greed that is on full display in our country right now. I will remind you again that Dr. King was marching with striking garbage workers in Memphis TN when he was killed.

That's what this uprising looks like.

Acts 3. Peter and John go into the Temple and see a paralyzed man begging at the gate and they say, "Silver and gold we do not have but what we do have we give you; in the name of Jesus, rise up and walk." And immediately this person feels this healing in his body and he stands up and starts dancing around the Temple.

What I know about healing I learned from HIV/AIDS. And that means I know that there is a lot of healing that can be done in the absence of a cure. But I also know that however much healing can be done in the absence of a cure, that is never an excuse for not looking for one.

I thank God every day for the advances made in managing AIDS. But I also know that there were 7000 people who died of AIDS in this country last year and the number of deaths around the world is still staggering.

What this uprising looks like is a priority for healing – in ourselves and in our world.

And that was illustrated beautifully for us last week with those young women – Adan, Luna, and Eleanor – Palestinian and Jewish Israeli young people working for healing and peace. If you were wondering why there was no video of their message from last week, it's because the work is dangerous.

If you want to know what this uprising looks like, you only have to look into the faces of these young women doing the dangerous work of peace – trying to free people from the hatred and bigotry and economic interests that enslave people so that they cannot even imagine peace.

Easter is an uprising of justice and healing and peace.

And now we come to this story in Acts 8.

Acts 8:26-40

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.)*

So, right from the outset, this uprising looks like someone “getting up” and going down from a familiar place – Jerusalem – to an unfamiliar place – Gaza. And the way to get there is to take this wilderness road.

You know that our covenant says that “there are no boundaries we will not cross.” And, for the record, there are *some* boundaries we should not cross. This is not a pass for exploitation and abuse. There are some boundaries we should *not* cross. But what this covenant calls us to is getting up from our familiar places and going down that wilderness road where the landscape can be a little disorienting to discover connections and relationships you never knew were there all along.

Here’s the problem I have with being a “welcoming church;” hard as that can be sometimes, it might lull us into thinking that the change we want to be in the world is about other people coming to us rather than us going to other people.

So here’s what this uprising looks like in Acts. Philip, verse 27 says, “*got up and went.*” Sometimes this uprising just looks like people willing to get up out of their comfort zones to connect with people different from themselves.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’³¹ The Ethiopian replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.*

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.’

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

Now let me take a minute to imagine what this Ethiopian eunuch – this powerful person in a foreign government – had just experienced in Jerusalem. The story says that he had “come to Jerusalem to worship God.” But when he got there, he would have been told, “Look, it’s so nice that you joined us today for worship here in the Temple but you have to stay in this outer court. This inner area is closed to foreigners like you and especially, according to the Law, people of confusing sexual and gender identity.” That was the problem for an Ethiopian eunuch. He had come all that way to worship in the house of God, only to be told that the deepest, innermost part of that experience in that community was closed to him.

And you noticed that this Ethiopian eunuch just happened to be reading the prophet Isaiah when Philip showed up. The part he was reading was Isaiah 55. And it doesn’t take much to imagine that Philip started there

and said: “Let’s read the next chapter, Isaiah 56.” That’s the passage Cassia read for us this morning:

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
‘The LORD will surely separate me from God’s people’;
and do not let the eunuch say,
‘I am just a dry tree.’
For thus says the LORD:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.*

*And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to the Lord, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be Lord’s servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer ...
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.*

And then Philip might say: “Here’s the good news – when Jesus went up to the Temple he threw out the money changers and quoted this passage from Isaiah: ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.’”

That’s you!

³⁶*As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’* * ³⁸*He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them,*

Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.*

“These – the foreigner and the eunuch – I will bring to my holy mountain,” Isaiah says, “and I will make them *joyful* in my house of prayer.” And so it is that this Ethiopian eunuch goes on his way rejoicing.

You notice that when the chariot got to the place where there was some water, Philip did not say: “Hey, look, there’s water; wouldn’t you like to be baptized?”

It was the Ethiopian eunuch who asked: “What prevents me?”

On the one hand, it could be the Ethiopian eunuch saying: “If all that you say is true, why shouldn’t I be included in this good news?”

On the other hand, it could be the eunuch saying: “I went all the way to Jerusalem to worship God only to discover that I was prevented by my nationality and my sexuality and my gender identity. Even if what you say is true, that none of these things get in the way of my participating in this good news, what else is there that will prevent me from being included? When it comes to religion, there’s always something.”

Beloved, this is the world we live in – a world where people assume that there will always be something that prevents us from participating in that great uprising of human freedom – if it’s not the color of my skin, it’s something else; if it’s not my sexuality, it must be something else; if it’s not my gender, it must be something else. I am not old enough or I am too old. I am too poor or too rich. I am too tall or too short. Whatever it is, there will always be something that prevents me from being included and fully participating in this uprising of justice and healing and peace.

So let me say right here, this morning, that there is nothing that prevents you from being included – nothing that prevents you from participating in this uprising of justice and healing and peace.

This hymn we are going to sing this morning was Ned Allyn Parker's – the Rev. Dr. Ned Allyn Parker who was one of our pastor's here and is now at Andover Newton Seminary at Yale – this hymn was his favorite, "All Are Welcome." And if you follow Ned on Facebook, you know that he posted a video about this song after watching an HBO story about the neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville and that scene of the car plowing into counter-protestors and killing Heather Heyer.

On his video, Ned talks about this song and says that we have come to a moment when we have to decide if "intolerance is tolerable." He reminds us of his own experience in recovery and that part of the healing – part of the freedom - that happens there is because people are willing to say out loud the truth about their lives. So he calls us – for the sake of this uprising we are part of – to say out loud that there is no place for bigotry or racism; to say out loud that Black Lives Matter; to say out loud that immigrants are welcome; to say out loud that the human beings that have been defined by their sexual orientation or their gender identity are made in the image of God; to say out loud that we love our Muslim neighbors. "Don't just post it on Facebook," he says, "say it out loud."

I think the Rev. Dr. Ned Allyn Parker is right. Intolerance isn't a difference of opinion. Intolerance is deadly. And if we believe this good news that there is nothing that can prevent us from participating in this uprising of justice and healing and peace, then say it – or sing it – out loud.

So today, beloved ones, if you hear that nagging voice inside your head that says: "There must be something that prevents me from being included," and if you are willing to hear that voice that says "there is nothing," than for God's sake, for the world's sake, and for your own, do not harden your hearts.