

August 7, 2022
"Blood On Our Hands"
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 / Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-12
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Typically, when I'm preparing a sermon, I sit with the scripture texts awhile until a basic focus emerges. I choose a related verse or two, or occasionally another quote, to use for the bulletin cover. And then I come up with a title that more or less captures the focus.

I try give myself at least some sense of where I'm headed with the sermon. That happens early in the week.

I am not, at this point, an extemporaneous preacher. I admire those who are, but for the most part I write my sermons out ahead of time. And sometimes, by the time I actually do that (often Saturday night, early Sunday morning, if I'm being honest), the sermon doesn't necessarily fit the title as much as I thought it would. Or I just think of a title I like better. The direction in which I thought I was headed at the beginning of the week doesn't necessarily match the destination where I end up by the end of the week.

That's the admittedly very minor risk I take in writing the sermon as the LAST step in that process.

The guiding scripture text this morning comes from Isaiah: "When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood." And based on that, my sermon title is, "Blood On Our Hands."

You all know what that expression means, of course. I'm not saying the sermon title doesn't fit. I guess I meant it to be a little provocative, but based on Amy's reaction when she saw it in this week's Connections, I realize it's not exactly inviting.

I don't care for blood myself. I have passed out more than once giving blood or having blood drawn for testing. I was never under any allusion that I'd be a doctor or nurse myself someday.

And whether or not you're like me, I'm quite sure that none of you have been thinking to yourselves, given the sermon title, 'O, this is fantastic! We're gonna hear all about how WE have blood on our hands, how WE are responsible for others' bleeding, suffering, death! This is just the pick-me-up I was hoping for this week.'

I get it. But I want to assure you that this is not some heavy guilt trip - that's not what this sermon is about. Allow me to elaborate.

We are barraged, on a daily basis, with news or experience of oppression and injustice – in this city and around the world, in policies and in practice. Of abject poverty and the ever-widening income and wealth gap between rich and poor; between Black, brown and white. Of desperate hunger and starvation. Of brutal violence and war. Of unspeakable cruelty and hatred expressed person to person, group to group, country to country. Of inhospitable borders. Of climate change and the blatant disregard for the health and well-being of the planet, so transparently tied to our own. Human suffering, species suffering, earth suffering.

If we're paying attention, it can be overwhelming. It is heartbreakingly. It is infuriating. For those who experience it, it is devastating.

Isaiah's vision as a prophet of God, as God's mouthpiece, could apply as much to our broken world as it did to his. Quick sidebar about Isaiah: I say 'his,' but for the record, the book of Isaiah is believed by scholars to be a composite of at least three different prophets who operated at different points in the history of Israel. So while this bit of Isaiah maybe 'his' vision, the whole book is really 'THEIR' vision.

End sidebar.

Isaiah – like prophets before and after – is desperately trying to get people to PAY ATTENTION! To pull their heads out of the sand. And like all prophets, Isaiah is not primarily addressing individuals but the people. The collective whole.

The people have their time-honored traditions, their festivals and assemblies, their prayers, their rituals of sacrifice and offering meant to make everything right, but they are illusions. Lip service, empty gestures that mask festering iniquity and inequity.

According to Isaiah, God has had enough. All those traditions and festivals and assemblies and prayers and rituals and offerings have become a burden to God. Because the people's hands are full of blood, figuratively speaking, of course. There is blood in the streets. The blood of the oppressed, the blood of the orphans and widows who represent throughout Hebrew scripture those who are most vulnerable, those most likely to suffer, when a society, as a whole, turns its back on love and compassion as foundational ethics. Divine love and compassion.

They have become complacent again – or they remain complacent still – to the suffering all around them. They turn a blind eye to that suffering, they wash their hands of responsibility for it, to borrow another idiomatic expression, but their hands are still covered in blood. Isaiah is calling out social sin, far more important for the prophets than anything we understand as personal sin.

The measure of a healthy society, as many have said, is in how it treats its so-called "weakest" members. Those most vulnerable. As the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti once wrote, "It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society."

Isaiah is railing against how easily the Israelites have adjusted to a profoundly sick society. Isaiah is railing against complacency, indifference, hard-heartedness. "Your hands are full of blood" is just an expression, of course, but one meant to paint a vivid picture. To remind God's people, to remind us, that we are each other's keepers. EACH other's keepers. We are in this together. We belong to each other.

We are, to borrow the apostle Paul's metaphor, ONE body, whether we like it or not. And so, as Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthian church, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

If one bleeds, all bleed. All have blood on their hands.

We may or may not be or feel directly responsible for the blood shed, but in Isaiah's vision, when blood is shed in the form of oppression and injustice, in the form of brutality and violence, it's on all our hands – though admittedly on some more than others'.

Like some of you, I grew up in a Christian context that emphasized personal relationship with God, an intensely personal faith journey with Jesus as the guide. I eventually came to realize that I grew up with a theology that effectively encouraged navel-gazing, individual salvation, making sure that I was right in my relationship with God, with Jesus. Love of neighbor had only to do with charity, not justice. Acts of charity – not justice – were celebrated.

As Paulo Freire famously wrote in his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause – the cause of liberation."

And he goes on: "True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the 'rejects of life,' to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world."

These are the hands God has in mind. Hands holding hands in partnership and cooperation, working for liberation, not merely handouts. No blood, only sweat.

"Wash yourselves;" Isaiah continues as God's mouthpiece, "make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

Wash yourselves clean, wash your hands of blood but not of responsibility. As Freire also wrote, "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral." Isaiah is railing against a false sense

of neutrality. Oppression and injustice, fueled by unaccountable power, always depend on enablers. Accomplices.

We may not feel responsible for the injustice and suffering we see in the world around us, but in Isaiah's divine view, within the divine vision of one global body where all suffer when even one suffers, we are. Blood is on our hands, and so we are responsible, individually and collectively, for confronting and uprooting the causes of that unjust suffering. And when it comes to racism, for example, white folks like me have a particular responsibility to confront and uproot.

On that note, Isabel Wilkerson, in her incredible book, "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents," examines the historical roots of the uniquely American caste system and its underlying sin of white supremacy racism. In one chapter, she uses the metaphor of an old house to describe the American reality and experience – where the work is never done and you don't expect it to be. If any of you have ever owned or lived in an old house, you understand what she's talking about.

She writes, "When you live in an old house, you may not want to go into the basement after a storm to see what the rains have wrought. Choose not to look, however, at your own peril. The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction. What you are wishing away will gnaw at you until you gather the courage to face what you would rather not see."

She, like Isaiah, is calling us to find the courage to look and to act accordingly. To love accordingly. Nothing will change if we don't, if we wash our hands of responsibility – responsibility to repair and restore, even if we aren't responsible, or don't feel responsible, for what is broken.

Referring specifically to the legacy of racism, she goes on: "Many people rightly say, 'I had nothing to do with how this all started. I have nothing to do with the sins of the past. My ancestors never attacked indigenous people, never owned slaves. And, yes. None of us was here when this house was built. ... but we are here, the current occupants of

a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now."

And allow me to quote further, because I think this metaphor presents a powerful opening. At least it does for me.

She describes what happens, as we all know, when the issues go unaddressed. We know something about deferred maintenance at Calvary, not by choice but by circumstances.

"When people live in an old house," she writes, "they come to adjust to the idiosyncrasies and outright dangers skulking in an old structure. They put buckets under a wet ceiling, prop up groaning floors, learn to step over that rotting wood tread in the staircase. The awkward becomes acceptable, and the unacceptable becomes merely inconvenient. Live with it long enough, and the unthinkable becomes normal. Expose over the generations, we learn to believe that the incomprehensible is the way that life is supposed to be."

Life as it is for so many, the world as it is in so many places, bleeding under the weight of oppression and injustice and violence and suffering, is not the way it's supposed to be. Intellectually, spiritually, we understand that – at least most of us. But the world as it is is ours to deal with.

So practically speaking, in the way we live our lives, in the attention we pay to our neighbors, do we actually assume responsibility? Are we working for the world we want for everyone, the world as it should be, as God intends, in whatever ways we can? We can't save the world on our own, of course. As individuals, there's only so much we can do. As a congregation, there's only so much we can do. And there's always a balance to strike in loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

But Isaiah, speaking for God, reminds us that we have to be intentional in figuring out what that commitment looks like for us. We have to be diligent, each of us, in discerning what we CAN do, what we WILL do, where our focus will be, what role we will play, to

wash our own hands clean and take personal responsibility for confronting the root causes of oppression and injustice. In one form or another. At least in our broken corner of the world.

Again, Isaiah's prophetic vision is primarily directed to the collective. To our shared responsibility for social health and well-being that is measured, first and foremost, by the condition of those most vulnerable. And our collective responsibility to hold those in power accountable to that measurement.

Thoughts and prayers, offerings and rituals, mean absolutely nothing if we fall short on that measurement.

God's commandments are summed up with one word: love. Love, in practice, in action, intended to prevent oppression and injustice and inequity within the community of God's people.

So oppression and injustice are what makes God angry, what made Jesus so angry, what prompts God to speak through prophet after prophet to get our attention. To keep reminding us, again and again, that we are members of ONE body in spite of the many divisions WE have invented. And keep inventing. We are responsible for each other's well-being. We are responsible for each other's liberation.

When we refuse and rebel that Divine directive, conceding to the decay of social sin, Isaiah says we will be "devoured by the sword." We will collectively die by the sword, not as punishment from God – again, contrary to traditional theology and popular belief and whatever else any other preacher might say, do not believe for one second that that is how God works! Not our God of Unconditional Love.

We will be "devoured by the sword" simply because we collectively lived by the sword. We will reap what we sow. We ARE devoured by the sword because we DO live by the sword. With blood on our hands.

You know as well as I do that violence of all kinds – physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological violence; racial, sexual, religious, cultural, economic, environmental

violence – from the top to the bottom of our society, begets violence. We see it every damn day. Some of you experience it. In the form of our current climate chaos, we are all experiencing it.

But, BUT, when we are faithful to the Divine directive, willing and obedient and courageous in our quest for Divine Love realized as compassion and justice, love with its clothes on, love in public as Cornel West puts it; when we are willing and obedient and courageous enough to move BEYOND lip service and empty gestures and owning our part of the shared responsibility for each other's and our collective well-being and liberation, Isaiah suggests that we will “eat the good of the land.”

We will all, ALL, enjoy the fruits of creation that have always been intended to nourish and sustain life. Abundant life, as God intends. As God has intended from the beginning.

May our hands, individual and collective, be washed clean. And with our hands joined in love, in compassion, in justice, may we eat and enjoy together the good of the land.

May it be so.