

In Praise of Uncertainty
Preached by
Rev. Dr. Linda Even
United Church of Fayetteville
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For reflection: *"In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party - and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaption to effect His purpose. The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true -- that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere great power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds."*
 Abraham Lincoln

Introduction to Scripture:

It is my practice on one or more of the "patriotic" holidays to intentionally address issues of the nation, our citizenship in two kingdoms or major events in our communal life. For that reason, the Isaiah text was chosen for today and the epistle reading is one usually paired with it when it does appear in the lectionary. Given the truly astounding events and comments made in the recent year and a half, I and most people in public positions have been and are under a great deal of pressure to make proclamations from the various pulpits in which we might find ourselves. While these encouragements have not solely referred to national events, it is where the greatest pressure is.

While I will address some of the national conversation, first I will offer some background about my training and understanding of the role of the pulpit. I will limit myself to my areas of specialization (biblical interpretation and theology) and try to note my personal opinions and those things outside my areas of expertise.

Our reading from Isaiah is known as the call of Isaiah. Let us listen for God's word for us on this day.

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-10

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."

Epistle Reading: Romans 8:12-17

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Sermon: In Praise of Uncertainty

Weary is me! I am lost for I am a preacher of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips. I am no Isaiah and I expect no hot-coal-lip-cleansing purge (at least I hope not), but I have a sense of how he felt being called to speak in difficult days. Isaiah's days were not unlike ours – a period of economic and social disruption, threats by foreign powers, and at the same time many traditional worship practices were falling by the way. Who is adequate to speak to all that AND to all the people who have different needs, experiences and viewpoints? At such times, those who have a public voice, in whatever forum, experience a hyper-scrutiny of what we say and do not say, and a fair amount of direction about what we ought or ought not say.

Whether it is about church attendance, contemporary life and needs, parenting, participation in worship or congregational activities or especially today, local, national and international politics, there is a lot people think they ought to be hearing from the pulpit – or more likely – someone else ought to be hearing from the pulpit. In our extraordinary times, that could be a weekly occupation supplemented by a daily blog on “today’s headlines.” The request/occasional demand is often phrased as “I think people ought to know what you think.” (If I might be permitted a moment of personal levity, it’s my observation that most people would be content knowing a little less of what I think.)

I find the request curious on a number of levels. First, the speaker believes (rightly or wrongly) that they know what I think based on conversations we have had or preaching or praying I have done or what I ought to think by virtue of my vocation, and believe we are in agreement. At the same time, they believe others (the ones they don’t agree with and presume, rightly or wrongly, that I don’t agree with them either) have been unable to make those same discernments.

Further, to set up a model of pronouncements from the pulpit, whether in this room or in whatever forum the position makes space for short-circuits the necessary critical community-building, reconciliation-making conversations between and among parties of differing views, but who quite frequently have common goals. I don't think that people are of ill-will or evil intent when they make these requests. The requests are most often a measure of being conflict-averse and wishing someone else would do it. If there is to be conflict, the model of preacher pronouncement as opposed to direct engagement puts the conflict between the preacher and other parties. It's called triangulating and I am loathe to participate for the health of the community.

My natural wordsmith's aversion to having someone else put words in my mouth is but a small reason I struggle on these occasions. The major reason is my training and understanding of the preacher's role, the power of the pulpit and its relation to the community which is served—both the immediate congregation and to whatever degree the wider world. I am making no judgements about anyone else's training or practice. I am merely describing my own.

I understand that I have a responsibility to God, to the people and to myself. I begin with the Word of God. I try not to do what is called “proof texting”—finding something in Scripture that supports what I believe. As we know most obviously when someone else does it, one can find something to support almost every point of view within Scripture's realistic observations on the human condition, the ways of people of faith and the challenges of living in an ever-changing world.

The charge is to bring the lens of Scripture to contemporary life in ways that empower the living of it. Like all other human beings, I see the world through a particular lens of experience, education, opportunity and limits. One way I seek to counteract those tendencies is by using the lectionary—a suggested schedule of readings from both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. Through its use, we are exposed to the fullness of Scripture and deterred from returning again and again to favorites or avoiding ones we don’t care for or prefer to think no longer apply.

My training in interpreting Scripture is to do so in the context of the whole Word of God and not focus on an isolated sentence or two. My training comes from a Reformed perspective in which the first commandment, the one prohibiting idolatry, is the greatest of all – and the greatest idolatry of all is presuming to know the mind of God. Such a view discourages unreflective certainty.

My second major understanding is about the pulpit—which is far more than the piece of furniture I am currently standing behind. From this place, I am called to share with the people what happens when I wrestle with the text and with life, their comforts and discomforts, being as true to the Word as I can. That wrestling may result in pastoral care, teaching, encouragement, challenge or prophesy, as shaped by the text and the times. There is a power in the pulpit that accrues to the one standing in it that comes from position, from role, from trust – and my training is always to be aware of that power and to steward it carefully.

I remember that a sermon is not a conversation; that the people may have responses to what I say or do, but this is not an occasion when the congregation has the power to respond immediately or engage in debate. Further, the issues before us defy simplification and cannot be dealt with reasonably in the few minutes of allotted sermon attention.

Finally, I am aware that we are a people of diverse experience, thoughts, viewpoints, opportunities and perspectives. The role is to call us ALL to greater discipleship, not simply to provide back-patting reassurance that we are on the right side. Nor is it to condemn portions of the community who may or may not agree with the dominant threads of thought and theology.

Not long after I arrived here, a member of my search committee told me she had expected me to challenge the people she disagreed with, but did not expect to be challenged by me, as was happening. I've never been sure whether that comment was intended as a compliment or not, but I still consider it to be one. I have no capacity to make everyone happy, nor is that my goal. At the same time, it is not my call to be wishy-washy or fail to be clear about what Scripture calls us to say and do.

Those are some of the key elements that shape my approach to the pulpit. Do I fall short of my training, my belief, of full discipleship? Absolutely. I am a preacher of unclean lips. There is no claim or possibility of perfection, but without the goals and standards there is no growth in discipleship – mine or anyone else's.

All that having been said, I'd like to demonstrate some of what I have just spoken of and to respond to an expressed need by any number of people to hear some biblical reflection on the national crisis currently before us. We are aided in the endeavor because there has been a lot of Bible-thumping on all sides of the immigration debate—a debate that reached new heights of energy, anger, concern and compassion with a policy (now rescinded) of separating children from parents presumed to be illegal immigrants. If nothing else positive comes out of these current debates, they may contribute to public awareness that contrary to the opinion of many, Scripture has a great deal to say about contemporary life.

The Attorney General cited Scripture in support of the policy. As a citizen, I was offended. In my opinion, the federal government ought not be imposing a particular religious viewpoint on the nation as a matter of law. I would have been equally offended had a government official used biblical citations about the treatment of foreigners as resident aliens as a justification for law. While I am not an expert on constitutional law, the separation of church and state embedded in our Constitution was designed to protect the church from the state and prevent the state's usurpation of it or the imposition of a particular religious viewpoint on the people. The flip side is not the case. The Constitution does not protect the actions of the state or its officials from its citizens' exercise of their faith in the public forum in so long as that exercise doesn't impinge on the rights of other citizens.

Further, while I affirm and embrace the power and ability of lay people to read and interpret Scripture, the Attorney General's use of Paul's words from his letter to the church at Rome was an example of the previously mentioned proof texting. The AG lifted the words from their context—which were part of Paul's argument that regarded participating in the citizenship expectations of the community as but the first step in regarding one's neighbor as God would. According to Paul, such responsible participation in the civic life is included in but is not the totality of obeying the law of love – that law being an entire way of living, not a mushy feeling.

I have already alluded to another element of the public Biblical conversation with regard to the current situation – the regular references to Scripture's directives about the treatment of foreigners, resident aliens and strangers. One thing we can learn from the repeated reminders to the people of God about such expected treatment is that which we have discussed before: that which is mentioned often is hardest to learn, and often unfulfilled. The struggle to welcome the different, the other, not to be afraid and to otherwise include the stranger in the common public life and provide for the dignity of each person is not new. It is an ancient and continuing struggle for the human creature. That is not to say that it doesn't matter, or it isn't a problem, but it is to suggest that the current circumstance is not the rise of some insidious evil or new tribalism, but rather stirrings that have bedeviled us (pun intended) since we left the Garden.

The Bible was remarkably realistic about human life and interactions – despite its reputation ☺. It acknowledged that there would always be strangers in the land, while remaining largely silent as to the justice of those movements. Some portion would be the result of migrations, due to famine or war. A large percentage of the strangers would have been trafficked into new locations as prisoners of war or slaves. Scripture duly reports these sweeping movements. In some of those, the people of God were victims and in others perpetrators of the disruption of populations. It would, however, be highly anachronistic to impose interpretation of those same texts as a Scriptural mandate for a particular immigration policy. At the time there was no contemporary understanding of national borders

and the intricacies of citizenship. Proof texting is dangerous, regardless of which side yields to the temptation of using it.

Those readings clearly suggest that tearing children from their parents' arms is in contradiction to the mandate for the responsible treatment of foreigners and aliens or any human being. All good and faithful people deplore and denounce such actions. While good and faithful people agree in the condemnation of the abuse of other human beings (among which family separation may be counted), good and faithful people do disagree about immigration policy, its needs, purposes, and administration.

I believe all of this supports my original premise. Such issues are too complex for a full treatment from the pulpit, yet deserve our attention, our discussion, our faith-guided choices with, among and to the benefit of the whole community. The Bible can inform our discussions and guide our decisions, but it doesn't provide us with clear and convenient solutions that require no discussion or interpretation.

If there is a new tribalism in this country, I would argue that it is a tribalism of thought and vote. Isolating ourselves from people who think differently might accomplish some short-term relief from frustration, but such isolation and separation moves us not one inch toward living in the loving holy relationships for which God has created us and to which God calls us.

As we approach these conversations with others, as we strive to reconcile and rebuild communities of faith, trust, justice, compassion and hope, we might all do well with an injection of uncertainty and humility. Just as I am no Isaiah, I am no Abraham Lincoln, but I highly commend his meditations on God's role and mind during the Civil War, one of which I have provided for reflection in today's bulletin. Let us live in praise of uncertainty about the unassailable rightness of our own positions, thoughts and viewpoints, so that we might hear the Word of God afresh. Let us respond and work for the upbuilding of the human community with those who have the portion of the truth we do not possess. Amen.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate and ever-present God: We ask for the gift of your Spirit so that it might flow through us. We breathe in ---and breathe out as in silence we wait.

We pray for a cooling balm of healing.

We breathe in ---and breathe out as in silence we wait.

We pray for a cleansing breath of calm, of peace and hope.

We breathe in ---and breathe out as in silence we wait.

We pray for a freshening wind of perspective, ideas, commitment and energy.

We breathe in ---and breathe out as in silence we wait.

We pray with the silent meditations of our hearts and with the words your Son taught us to pray together: **The Lord's Prayer**