

Rebuilding the Foundations *Warning: Construction Area*

Isaiah 56:1-2, 6-8

April 28, 2024

The end of exile is the beginning of rebuilding.

Way back in September, we began this program year at Second Church by introducing our theme, "A Time to Rebuild." That very first Sunday, I quoted the writer Alana Newhouse in a 2021 essay titled, "Everything Is Broken." I thought it was a hopeful way to start the new year! In depth, Newhouse describes the erosion of trust, the decay of institutions, and the collapse of communal identity that have characterized recent years. The writer Jonathan Haidt, in a 2022 piece with the memorable title, "Why the Past Ten Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," compares our era to the story of the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis, which he describes as "a story about the fragmentation of everything...the shattering of all that seemed solid, the scattering of people who had once been a community."

We're returning to the themes of fragmentation and rebuilding, the stories of exile and return in the Old Testament prophets this spring. The book of Isaiah covers a lengthy stretch of ancient history, from the conquest of Jerusalem and the capture of its residents by the Babylonians, through the stretched out exilic period, and finally to the return of many of the exiles under the rule of the Persians two generations later. This morning's passage takes place at the beginning of the return. And given that context, we might expect it to be a text of celebration. A time of joyful reunion. Triumphant homecoming. But that is not what happened. What the returning exiles find, what they discover, is not what their grandparents left behind seventy years earlier. Their beloved city is in shambles. The temple, the center of faith and community, utterly

destroyed. It is not relief but grief that characterizes the end of exile.

Everything is broken. The prophet knows this, but it is not where he lingers. Not for long. Isaiah moves swiftly from the indicative (that is, description of the wreckage) to the imperative (time to get to work, guys). You see, the end of exile is the beginning of rebuilding. The sooner we move from grievance over the past to the possibilities of the present, the better our future will be.

Alana Newhouse puts it this way: "Once you stop spending your time being outraged, you'll realize how much energy you suddenly have for whatever work you're called to do. Build something new; invest in current institutions to see if they can be made better. Think bravely and creatively...be deliberate about what you are doing and try to understand those who do it differently."

When the exiles come back to Jerusalem, they cannot simply inhabit the normalcy of the past. There is no going back again. There is nothing left. And so, the prophet calls them. Put up the sign. Warning: Construction Area Ahead.

So, what does faithful rebuilding look like now? The prophet has some thoughts on this.

He begins with two clear commands: "Maintain justice and do what is right." Given the opportunity to build something new in a devastated place, God's people must first establish a foundation. Isaiah proposes "justice." As we look to future building, we too must determine which set of values will serve

as our foundation. I think the primary questions at the heart of our collective life are these two: What kind of people do we want to become? What kind of communities do we want to build?

Are we really content with the reality that the zip code in which you are born determines the chance you will have, or do we want to construct another reality?

Are we really comfortable surrendering our children to screens and our attention to cycles of rage, or could we build more life-giving relationships?

Are we really satisfied with leaders who appeal to fear and sow division, or do we want to invest our lives in the formation of those who will call us to virtue?

These are not hypothetical questions. They are choices we all make, whether intentionally or unknowingly.

The exiles released from captivity in Babylon are encouraged to construct a new reality, a place of belonging. And who belongs? I'm glad you asked because this is the unexpected—even offensive—twist in the prophetic text. Isaiah makes what would have been a stunning pronouncement of God's expectation. "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." Having been excluded and exiled, God's people must break the cycle of retribution by extending the invitation to all.

Now, there are requirements for membership. Just not the ones they might have expected. There is the expectation that the newly welcomed will hold fast to the covenant. That means, in other words, act like a neighbor. And there is the command to practice the Sabbath, to lives marked by rhythms of work and worship.

Under the banners of covenant and Sabbath, God gathers an incredibly diverse collection to begin the work of reconstruction. There are surprise guests and unlikely allies. Former enemies gathered for the task of rebuilding.

Now it is tempting to imagine this gathering through an exclusively spiritual lens, the vision of a coming kingdom where reconciliation is complete, where heavenly mansions line golden streets, and humankind learns war no more. And these are images of scripture to be sure. I believe that day will come, when God will restore all that we have broken. But let me suggest that this vision is meant not to absolve us of responsibility but to infuse our efforts with hope.

I've always loved these wise words preserved in the Talmud, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justice now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete this work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Second Church, it is *not* enough to dream and pray and sing about a distant future where all will one day be welcomed. It is *not* faithful to use God's promise to excuse our inaction.

Isaiah's vision is not strictly spiritual. It is political in nature. By this, I do not mean that it fits neatly into the categories of partisan polarization or issue-based identity that the term might evoke for you. But what I *do* mean is that God's words to the returning exiles have everything to do with how we structure our life together. How we interact with our neighbors. How we relate to outsiders. How we live in covenantal community. There is a redefinition of political life in these ancient texts. It stands on the foundation of justice. It compels the faithful to build a different world beginning with the most basic and ordinary acts. Be a neighbor. Practice the Sabbath.

If everything is broken, then perhaps the time for rebuilding has come. I am convinced that rebuilding can only happen if it begins in places like this one. Right here. You see, we cannot expect market-driven corporations or slow-moving bureaucracies to save us. Not now. Even if their intentions are ethically sound, their purpose is not primarily the creation of community and the care of the neighbor. That change must begin with us.

Last Sunday, I stood up here and looked across a packed sanctuary on Confirmation Sunday. A word lingered in my heart and mind. That word is *renewal*. What is happening here is unusual. It's exciting. It's hopeful.

The thing about spiritual renewal is that it always leads us to engage the needs of our neighbors and the concerns of our world. What kind of people do you want to be? What kind of community do you want to build?

I want to be a person invested in renewal. I want to be a person defined by hope and committed to doing my part. I want to bear witness to Christ and set an example for my sons and all who may be watching. I am convinced that we together can become a community where renewal inspires rebuilding. And I am further convinced that it will take every single one of us.

A house of prayer for all people. Always under construction. Amen.