

Commentary on Isaiah, 9/09
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When I first read this passage in preparation for today, I was struck by the immediacy of human interdependence in Isaiah's times. When Isaiah admonished the people not to oppress their workers, he was talking about individuals whom they knew by name, who harvested their fields and nursed their children. In today's world, I might do right by the people who work in my home or report to me at the office, but when I buy a shirt, I'm likely to be exploiting the poor thousands of miles away, not to mention polluting the earth.

Immediately, I was repelled by the helplessness of this thought. "Oh, poor me," I seemed to be saying. "I am embedded in (and profiting from) an unjust global economy and therefore unable to do right." Not only was that sentiment self-pitying and unproductive, but the stark contrast I was drawing between then and now was undoubtedly wrong. Certainly it is true that economic relations were simpler and less distal in Isaiah's time than they are now. But even then individual relationships were embedded in social structures and norms that constrained and shaped actions and their outcomes. There was patriarchy, a caste system, slavery! Indeed, Isaiah seems to recognize the reality of structural injustice. He does not say merely that we should feed the hungry and clothe the naked. He says that we should "unfetter the bonds of the yoke...let the oppressed go free, and whatever the yoke...break it."

In the face of powerful unjust local, national, and global socio-economic structures, how are we to fulfill Isaiah's injunction to be righteous? The good news that Isaiah has for us, I believe, is that if we truly wish to set forth on the path of justice, we will not be alone. First, there is God, and I believe this pertains whether you believe in a God who arranges human affairs or Kaplan's God that is the force for good in the universe. Isaiah tells us, "you shall cry out and God will say, 'Here I am.'" And what is it that we need to do for God to hear our cry? Well, clearly we need to start doing right by others. That is what this passage most famously tells us. But it seems to me that that is not all. Isaiah warns us against *empty* ritual, but not against ritual itself. In fact, he makes a special point of calling us to the observance of Shabbat, and describes its essence in much the same words that he uses to talk about Yom Kippur. If you "honor" Shabbat "by abandoning your customary activities and not pursuing your business or even speaking about it... then you will take delight in the Eternal..." Similarly, he says that on the day of our fast we must not be "preoccupied" with our possessions. God wants us to make holy time when we free our minds, souls, and bodies from the economic relationships of daily life. If we do that, the passage says, God will "guide" us, "nourish" us, "strengthen" us.

I imagine that all of us have had an experience that could help us understand how creating holy time leads to change. We take the time to pray, meditate or reflect; we listen to that still, small voice we've been trying to ignore; we do things differently than we've always done or try to stand in somebody else's shoes; and suddenly we see things in a way we never did before; we find inspiration, surprises, answers. God doesn't expect us to know at any given moment every thing we must do, every step we must take. What

God wants us to do, as Isaiah tells us, is to “Pave a road. Clear a path! Remove the obstacles from my people’s path.” If we remove the obstacle of mistaking ritual for action and instead take some action, and if we remove the obstacle of preoccupation with our possessions and our work, to create holy time, then God will help us follow the path of justice.

We have not only God to help us follow the path, but each other. In some places in this text, Isaiah speaks of the individual, but mostly he speaks of us as a people. This is logical, I think. I noted at the beginning of my commentary that our problems, our injustices, are of our collective making.. Well, then our solutions must be collective as well. In fact *because* we are interdependent, our actions can bring about not only distant harm – the problem I described when I began -- , but also distant and sometimes unforeseen good. Because we are interdependent, our actions can inspire others, our support can give hope to the weary, we can learn from each other, our offerings can provide the resources needed for somebody else’s work to thrive – often in ways we do not expect. Isaiah’s promise is that if we create holy times when we step outside of our economically-defined relationships and mindset, if we come together to pave the road, and to unfetter the bonds of the yoke, then, *because* of our interdependence with each other and with God, things will happen that we cannot even imagine. “The ancient ruins shall be rebuilt...the foundations of old shall be reestablished; you will be called ‘repairer of the breach, restorer of paths for habitation.’” Today, Isaiah asks us to begin removing the obstacles from those paths.