

Our Hebrew scripture today comes from the prophetic book called Isaiah. Listen with me for God's word to us from chapter 58 (CEB):

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the finger-pointing, the wicked speech;
¹⁰ if you open your heart to the hungry,
and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,
your light will shine in the darkness,
and your gloom will be like the noon.
¹¹ The Lord will guide you continually
and provide for you, even in parched places.
God will rescue your bones.
You will be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water that won't run dry.
¹² They will rebuild ancient ruins on your account;
the foundations of generations past you will restore.
You will be called Mender of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Livable Streets.
¹³ If you stop trampling the Sabbath,
stop doing whatever you want on my holy day,
and consider the Sabbath a delight,
sacred to the Lord, honored,
and honor it instead of doing things your way,
seeking what you want and doing business as usual,
¹⁴ then you will take delight in the Lord.
I will let you ride on the heights of the earth;
I will sustain you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob.
The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

I have been trying for a long time to understand God. Now I have made friends with God. To love God truly you must love change, and you must love a joke, these being the true inclinations of God's own heart.¹

In the 1989 Houghton College yearbook you'll find a photo of this graduating senior trying to look thoughtful while sporting oversized 80s glasses and overcoiffed 80s hair. Printed next to me is that quote I chose from an Isak Dinesen short story: To love God truly you must love change, and you must love a joke, these being the true inclinations of God's own heart.

It was an aspirational quote. During college I felt ideas and commitments shifting inside me and I hoped that God was present in that growth. But that young man had little grasp of how *much* change would transform my world and my family and my understanding of God.

A few months after I graduated my dad died. That loss ruptured my reality in ways I had never known, was not prepared for. For a time I felt like I was living in spiritual exile, and I wrestled with how *God* relates to the suffering of the world. You may be familiar with that conundrum.

¹ Dinesen, Isak. "The Dreamers." *Seven Gothic Tales*. New York: Modern Library, 1980. p. 355.

Isaiah is shot through with that question also. These later chapters reflect the experience of people of Israel returning after the trauma of exile in Babylon. They're trying to rebuild, and still encountering serious challenges. The people live in a weird in-between time — the former things are gone, both good and bad, but where are the *new things* that God has promised?

In the midst of all that, some better-off Israelites are exploiting poor laborers. The community of Israel is falling into factions and throwing accusations at each other. They go through the motions of worship but don't actually take care of each other or of those who are hurting.

So here near the end of Isaiah we "find the word of God entering the[se] harsh realities of human struggle and suffering."² And God reveals that change must come. The prophet offers an if...then challenge. If you stop oppressing other people, if you give up the finger-pointing, if you share with the hungry, if you delight in sabbath, *then* your light will shine in the darkness, you will rebuild what's broken, you will take delight in God. "I will let you ride on the heights of the earth."

Even better, "your gloom will be like the noon." God says through this prophet: if you live out my justice, even your despair can be transformed into blazing daylight. It's a promise that God's floundering people can be changed and can flourish.

A couple weeks ago Aimee and I spent time with family in Portland, OR. Walking around downtown there, with today's scripture simmering in me, I turned a corner and was confronted with these huge block letters:



² Hanson, Paul D. *Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995. p. 192.

I smiled at the Holy Spirit's humor: it's funny to use a random commercial billboard a couple thousand miles away to deliver a nudge to us, the good people of Highland Presbyterian. And with Isaiah's prophetic words pointing our way, these sentences don't have to be scary. Yes, we must be changed — *so that* we will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that won't run dry.

I've only been around Highland for a few weeks and I'm learning some things about this place. For one, y'all do hospitality well. All kinds of people have welcomed me warmly. You've invited me to various ministries, to meals, and into heartfelt conversations. Today we'll have cake after worship for a second week in a row. That seems like a promising habit.

It's also clear that events from the past are still lingering with us.

There may be a previous staff member whom you most loved. That loss is real.

There may be a previous staff member with whom you most clashed. That relief is real.

I've heard stories that reveal the tenderness this congregation feels. More than one person has told me that this church feels a little broken, and they always mention in the same breath what a beautiful family of faith we can be. Broken and beautiful and beloved.

Our continuing challenge will be to speak the truth to each other in love. And, God help us, to put away that finger-pointing which corrodes community. Living as a faith community is always hard because of course our diverse needs and priorities and experiences bump up against each other. It was true for ancient Israel and it's true for us.

Sometimes those differences are generational: Sages vs. Boomers vs. Gen X vs. Millennials vs. Gen Z vs. Generation Alpha or however our youngest folks identify. Sure, we're likely to have some different desires. But no one gets to have exactly the church they want. Because if you run that experiment you will end up being a church of one. So we're in this together, and we need each other for discerning what God calls us to next.

Because we can't go back. We've already experienced a lot of change, including the upheaval of Covid. The former things have passed away and God is calling us to something new. I don't know what Highland's next year will bring, or five years, or 25 years. But I've got lots of questions about what *could* be, and I bet you do too.

Like how do we live rightly on a rapidly warming planet? You have been thinking about this for a while because we've got geothermal heating in the Pleune-Mobley Building. I'm delighted that we've installed electric vehicle chargers for the benefit of the neighborhood. Our Earth Care team is currently creating a community garden. So what if we could incorporate faithful environmental stewardship into *every* decision we make, into every ministry of this church?

Highland Presbyterian has a long history of offering faithful worship here on this corner. More recently we've also been making ways for people to join in worship online. One change coming up is that when Megan returns from family leave, we your pastors will share preaching equally. And wherever you're worshipping from today, consider this: When was the last time that something in worship *surprised* you?

If everything that happens in worship makes me comfortable, that just means that my own cultural preferences are being reinforced.³ How might our worship evolve if we yearn for more and different and younger people to find a home in this faith community, and to lead us? Beyond that, how might we keep stretching liturgically, musically, creatively? In a room like this, what kinds of visionary liturgical art could lift our hearts?⁴



We pastors are ordained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. How could our worship space show that communion and baptism are just as central to our life together as words are? If we chose to make open and flexible chancel space, what new freedoms could arise in worship and music and art? More simply, what if we make sure that more and different voices help lead worship each week, and what if our young people could feel more ownership of Highland's worshiping life?

I've been reading Linda Raymond and Bill Ellison's vibrant history of this church. When I joined the staff the first thing Kathleen handed me was this book. And it tells me that young people were the reason Highland Church began; it started as a neighborhood Sunday school. Here in our time, what might help young families to feel more welcome in the sanctuary?

Aimee and I have a friend named Anna who's a priest in the Church of England. Anna's congregation meets in a historic stone building not far from London, but the church strives to meet today's needs. So their sanctuary now includes an open space on one side where there's kid-sized furniture, soft toys for little ones, and a few rocking chairs for parents. We saw families using that area during worship. The kids were part of the church and they knew they were wanted. Here at Highland we've already got some rocking chairs back there, so maybe we're on our way.

³ Widmer, Corey. "The 75% Rule." *Presbyterian Outlook*, 19 June 2013. <https://pres-outlook.org/2013/06/the-75-rule/>

⁴ These images are from St. John's Presbyterian in San Francisco, where Theresa Cho is the pastor. The congregation creates new liturgical art for every season.

Walking up to the front door of this church I immediately noticed our Black Lives Matter signs. Especially in this city where Breonna Taylor was killed unjustly, proclaiming that Black lives matter to us and to God is of course a righteous thing to do. And I've read last year's Mission Study which identified racial justice as our first missional priority for the future of Highland Church. So how can we support and keep building on the work of our Race Equity Task Force?

Maybe we read together William Yoo's new book to understand how complicit we Presbyterians have been in the ongoing systems of white supremacy.

When Aimee and I bought our house in the Kingsley neighborhood, about three miles southeast of here, we looked at the City of Kingsley website to learn when recycling gets picked up. They've also got all the town's laws posted there. So I discovered Ordinance No. 2(k) from 1940 which reads "[These properties] shall never be sold, rented or leased to, or occupied by any person or persons of African descent."⁵ What a gut punch, made worse by the fact that that redlining ordinance wasn't locally repealed until 2004. Thank God that our friendly neighborhood has since become more diverse.

So how will white people like me actually commit to repairing the damage that people of color have suffered? Our church has taken a significant step by investing \$500,000 in Housing Partnership Inc., which helps make homeownership affordable and sustainable for underserved people in Louisville.

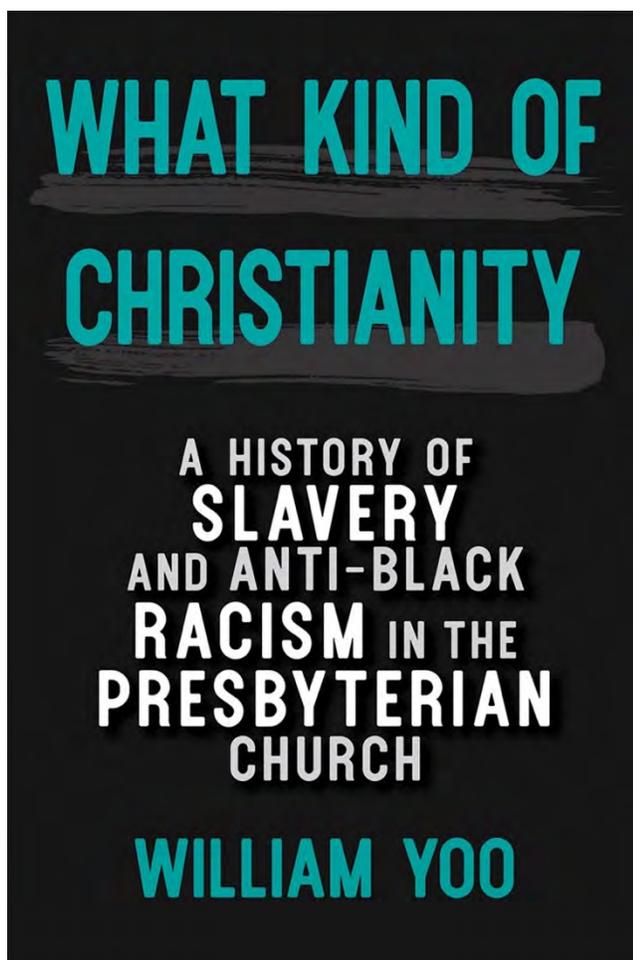
If you provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,
your light will shine in the darkness....

You will be called Menders of Broken Walls, Restorers of Livable Streets.

How could we continue to use our energy and resources to invest in Black lives?

At the end of our Isaiah text the prophet challenges the people's sabbath habits, specifically their doing business as usual on the day of divine rest. Neither commercial transactions nor empty religious practice actually honor the sabbath, says the prophet. Change is a must.

Five hundred years after Isaiah, in a synagogue on a sabbath, Jesus liberates a woman who had been imprisoned in her own bent body for 18 years. If Isaiah got to witness that scene, I think he'd say,



⁵ <https://cityofkingsley.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2004-1.pdf>

“Finally, somebody gets it!” In Jesus Christ, God’s light among us, worship and justice join hands and begin to transform the world.

Siblings in Christ, what could be?

You may have heard that leadership means letting people down at a rate they can stand. There’s some truth in that. But Isaiah 58 invites us to flip that around. I pray that God’s Spirit will lead us into *transformation* at a rate we can sustain. And yes, even while your Pastor Nominating Committee continues their diligent work, our creative faithfulness doesn’t get put on hold.

Be transformed by God and you will thrive, says the prophet. God help us rally toward *that*, today and through all the days we’re given.

In the name of God the Voice, the Word, and the Listener.