

Will tomorrow be like today? Expanding the conversation on the killing of Michael Brown

Ken Sehested, Circle of Mercy, Sunday 24 August 2014

Text: Isaiah 56

Chapter 56 of Isaiah was written as Israel was coming out of its long exile in Babylon in the mid-sixth century BCE. The opening verses of Chapter 56 express God's clear expectations for the people and predict happy results. But there is more.

In my sermon last month, I mentioned a theological debate going on in the Bible. Dueling texts. My text then was the cynical words from the book of Lamentations which insist there are times when "the crooked cannot be made straight," which contradicts three specific affirmations in Isaiah claiming that the crooked will in fact be made straight. Well, turns out tonight's text is dueling with another text in Deuteronomy.¹

In today's text Isaiah promises that neither the foreigner² nor the eunuch will be cut off from the assembly of the Lord: Do not let the foreigner say, "the Lord will surely separate me." Do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." Whereas in Deuteronomy the text says: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." [Furthermore] "Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the 10th generation none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." Then it names names: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord."

So there is both a consistency and a newness in Isaiah's proclamation: Maintaining justice and practicing Sabbath are underscored again. (By the way, practicing Sabbath originally had clear implications for the economy, for land ownership and for slaves.) In other words, when our relations with each other and with the land are put right, so is our worship, and God's house is thus known as "a house of prayer for all peoples," even for foreigners—for God will "gather others"—meaning outsiders—"to the house of Israel"; and even sexual minorities.

In Israel's creation story seeds get pivotal attention. And throughout biblical history marriages barren of children were an occasion of shame—usually born by the women. But here there is newness: Even the seedless are welcomed to the assembly. This is a bold stretching of the boundaries of God's favor. It reflects similarly bold stretching of the tradition by Jesus on several occasions in the New Testament.³ This homecoming from Babylon is something like a second exodus event.

But then the text suddenly goes sour. In verse 9 the prophet suddenly pivots from grand statements of God's inclusion to a brutal call for wild animals to come and devour, devour the "sentinels," the "shepherds" of Israel. In other words, the nation's moral/spiritual/political leaders, who are described as "silent dogs" who are "slumbering," who looks after their own profit margins and toast themselves repeatedly, draining bottle after bottle of wine, and boasting that "tomorrow will be like today, great beyond measure" (vs. 9). Just imagine a drunken fraternity party in a corporate boardroom. You can hear the voice of Gordon Gecko, the financial services wizard played by Michael Douglas in the film "Wall Street": "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works."

If *tomorrow* is like *today*, we are in deep do-do. I'm not sure we can take many more *today's* without losing heart.

Last week Hillary did what any good interpreter of Scripture should do, by tossing aside a crafted sermon to speak to the searing trauma unfolding in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, ignited by a police officer's brutal killing of Michael Brown. Today I want to further explore the meaning of this moment.

A scant four miles from where Michael Brown lay bleeding in the road is the grave of former slave Dred Scott. If you know US history, his name will be at least vaguely familiar. In 1847 Dred Scott went to court in Missouri and won his freedom. But then the State Supreme Court overturned the verdict, which was then appealed to the US Supreme Court. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote, "A free negro of the African race, whose ancestors were brought to this country and sold as slaves, is not a 'citizen' within the meaning of the

Constitution of the United States.” In other words, African Americans—freed or slaved—were not, nor ever could be, considered citizens of this country.

That dramatic legal precedent feels so like *yesterday*; but Michael Brown’s killing reveals it is so like today. Finally securing the right for common drinking fountains and bathroom facilities; finally getting to ride at the front of the bus and eating at the Woolworth counter; finally getting to register to vote without threat of physical violence, along with all that long history of lynching and Jim Crow law and social norms—we thought we were getting somewhere.

If our *tomorrows* are like our *today*s, we’re in trouble.

§ § §

One satirical journalist recently wrote a make-believe story of how the Ferguson story were to sound if the habits of American media were used in covering the story as if it happened in, say, Iraq or Pakistan:

Chinese and Russian officials are warning of a potential humanitarian crisis in the restive American province of Missouri, where ancient communal tensions have boiled over into full-blown violence.

"We must use all means at our disposal to end the violence and restore calm to the region," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in comments to an emergency United Nations Security Council session on the America crisis.

The crisis [began] in Ferguson, a remote Missouri village that has been a hotbed of sectarian tension. State security forces shot and killed an unarmed man, which regional analysts say has angered the local population by surfacing deep-seated sectarian grievances. Regime security forces cracked down brutally on largely peaceful protests, worsening the crisis.

"We can and should support moderate forces who can bring stability to America," Lavrov said.

America has been roiled by political instability and protests in recent years, which analysts warn can create fertile ground for extremists. . . .⁴

Why is it that violence *over there* always sounds worse than violence *over here*?

§ § §

If tomorrow is anything like today, we’re in for a hard day’s night, scented with tear gas.

It’s hard to blink without missing another beat of voracious and brutal hearts unleashed in the world. It’s a cable news network bonanza, with anchors as breathless as reporters on the Weather Channel during a hurricane.

Water has made the headlines repeatedly in recent months. Toledo had to ban tap water because of pollution in Lake Erie. Detroit’s shutting off water to customers behind on their payments was condemned even by the United Nations’ Human Rights Office. Earlier this year a chemical company’s spill in West Virginia polluted water in nine counties. (And the name of that chemical company? You’re gonna love this: Freedom Industries!)

The dogs of war have been unleashed yet again in Ukraine, in Gaza, in South Sudan. The civil war continues in Syria, and now a new and vicious player has shocked the world with the establishment of what is now called The Islamic State. For the first time in 18 centuries a Christian mass has not been said in recent weeks in the city of Mosul, where Christians have been expelled or undergone forced conversion to a draconian version of Islam. And then there was the massacre of hundreds of Yazidis, a religious minority group of Kurdish origin which most of us never heard of before now.

The questions surrounding the militarization of police departments have come to light with the turmoil unfolding in Ferguson. Reminds me of a Dennis the Menace cartoon. Dennis, as is often the case, is sitting in his “time out” corner, his parents looking on, very perturbed and soaking wet, holding one of those plastic toy water guns called “supersoakers.” Dennis says, “Well, you bought it for me. Did you think I wouldn’t use it?!”

If tomorrow is anything like today, I want to stay in bed. And we all wish that’s what Robin Williams would have done instead of taking his own life. Though I have to confess, on some days tossing in the towel seems like a rational thing to do.

§ § §

In 1992 I stumbled upon a story that was news not just to me but, as I soon discovered, also to all the veteran Baptist journalists I knew.

It was September 15, 1963, when the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed by a terrorist, taking the lives of four young girls. Remember this is less than three weeks after the historic March on Washington and Dr. King's dramatic "I Have a Dream" speech. For the sixth-century Israelites to whom Isaiah 56 is addressed, coming out of Babylon evoked similar emotions as did the Washington march for us. But then the captives reached Jerusalem, finding their temple in ruins, and suddenly it was for them like the 16th Street church bombing.

What I discovered in my research was that the Southern Baptist Convention's executive committee had a scheduled meeting the week of September 15, 1963. A resolution was hastily composed, expressing sympathy for the members of 16th Street Baptist Church, and included a line saying that Southern Baptist churches across the nation would be encouraged to contribute toward 16th Street's rebuilding.

The motion was voted down. And the executive director declared, *ex post facto*, "executive session" rules, directing the press covering their meeting to say nothing about the failed motion. Most obliged. One did not. And, from those leads, I tracked down the larger story.

As it happens, the Baptist Peace Fellowship was already exploring the option of holding our 1993 summer conference at Miles College, an historically-black school in Birmingham, and to focus attention on the 30th anniversary of the Birmingham Movement in civil rights history. Long story short, we did make those arrangements. In the preceding fall I wrote up the story I've just told, along with a statement called "The Birmingham Confession." We circulated the document containing the story and the confession, asking people to add their signatures and contribute as much as \$25 toward current 16th Street Baptist renovation needs. In the end we were able to donate more than \$5,000 to the church, whose pastor was our conference preacher.

In the process of lobbying a number of people for their signatures I called an old friend, one who held a PhD degree in ethics. When I explained my purpose in calling, his response was quick and brief: "I don't believe I need to apologize for something I didn't do." I was so stunned I ended up changing the topic of conversation. I wish I'd been quick enough to ask him how he afforded the seminary education he received from an institution founded by and funded through the profit from slave labor.

Surely this is among the profound problems we face in coming to terms with the legacy of racism in this country. The novelist James Baldwin captures this tragedy in his "Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundred Anniversary of the Emancipation."⁵ He wrote:

There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For those innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.

I hope that, by placing Michael Brown's killing and Ferguson's trauma in a larger, global context of suffering, you don't think I'm minimizing the former. Not at all. This killing, connected to a long string of similar killings, rightly deserves our focused attention, if for no other reason that our responsibility—our response-ability—is for that which lies most near at hand. It is so much easier to be outraged about things in faraway countries.

There is nothing more pitiful than liberals convulsed in moral indignation that costs them nothing. Let me say that again, for emphasis, and with minor editing: There is nothing more pitiful than liberals—like us—convulsed in moral indignation that costs us nothing.

If our *tomorrows* are to be little more than a repeat of endless *today's*, there are many things to be considered and acted upon. But surely one of the premier questions we must ask is: *Do we only choose responses that are convenient and cost-free?*

Earlier in the year, during our Lenten reflection group meetings, Bill Ramsey made an inspired comment. We were talking about the nature of the church, naming some of its needed

characteristics. Bill said, "I think the church should be a community of consequence." Dare we take that seriously, that membership here has consequences?

In a world where wild animals are loosed everywhere, our leaders sound remarkably like those parodied by Isaiah in chapter 59: "For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness." For them and their moneyed clients, there are no *tomorrows*, only endlessly profitable, ravenous *today's*.

We have, we are, and we will continue to make consequential choices about addressing issues of structural racism. Let me remind you of guidelines you already know

- Most of what we do won't be big and splashy. We have far more need of very ordinary actions and commitments, close at hand here in Asheville.
- Sometimes just showing up is important. Our current racial reality took 500 years to develop. Are we preparing ourselves, our children, and our children's children to the 10th generation to persevere in this struggle for justice?
- We need to make connections, strengthen coalitions, and build a web of relationships that can be mobilized for effective response to racism.
- We need to have the courage to explore and face up to our history and its grip on our corporate lives, not as a shaming but in order to loosen the grip of the often unseen forces that debilitate us.
- In communities of faith we need to understand that repentance is so much more than feeling bad about ourselves. It is so much easier to substitute feeling guilty in place of constructive acts of restorative justice.

Our *today's* can become dramatically different *tomorrows* if we maintain justice and do what is right; if we practice Sabbath and refrain from doing evil. We must lean, as a community of consequence, toward the promise that God's salvation will come and God's deliverance will be revealed.

And now pray aloud and in unison with me the traditional lines from the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: "Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

¹ Deuteronomy 23:1-3

² Cf. Leviticus 22:25, Ezekiel 44:6ff, Nehemiah 9:2

³ Matthew 15:10-28, John 5

⁴ <http://www.vox.com/2014/8/15/6005587/ferguson-satire-another-country-russia-china>

⁵ *The Fire Next Time*