

“Restorers of Streets and the Tension Needed to Get There”

Isaiah 58:1-12

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Like a lot of Isaiah fans, I'm all about the future that God promises to give to the people - "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." –words from Isaiah 43:2. Or these words from Isaiah 56:7: "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples," Or Isaiah 61:1: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

I'm all about these future visions especially one at the end of today's text that speaks to me in these days when our city can't seem to catch a break:

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in. (Isaiah 58:12)

It's the vision that I've held in my heart through the last eighteen years of ministry in Baltimore where I've believed that our city could be the best city on the east coast, a majority Black city which I believe could set a national model for a kind of rebirth that doesn't have to displace Black or Brown or poor people in order to get better, that preserves our irreplaceable architecture, our quirky neighborhood flair, refusing to imitate NY to the north or DC to the south. A city that lives into John Waters' tagline, "Baltimore: Come and Be Shocked," not from the murders, not from the dysfunction, not from the broken pavement or the boarded up homes, but shocked but a renaissance that could happen by building a city like a garden in which to grow beautiful people, to paraphrase Jim Rouse.

It's that vision that has driven me in the last two years of my public leadership with many of you in the BUILD organization working through a global pandemic to answer a fundamental question asked by our current Mayor before he even took office. "What would it take" he wanted to know, "to make your organization's redevelopment success on the eastside, my administration's strategy citywide?" It's not hard to see why he asked that of the organization that our congregation has been a member of

since the 1980s when we are remembered as one of the first predominantly white faith communities to join this Black led, faith grounded group. After all, BUILD's development approach has worked, increasing the population of three neighborhoods at the same time that the rest of the city has been hemorrhaging people; doubling the median income in those neighborhoods, cutting vacancy rate from above 40% to below 7%, restoring the wealth of hundreds of homeowners without displacing a single person, keeping a 90%+ Black neighborhood 90%+ Black, even cutting the murder rate in half. Scaling up that vision is what attracted me to this kind of work - relating to other faith leaders on the front lines of neighborhoods like Edmondson Village, and Franklin Square and Darley Park and Johnston Square with hope instead of hand wringing. Facing the board up realities of our streets with the conviction that ruins shall be rebuilt. Surviving the daily sirens in some of our neighborhoods with the belief that we will raise up many generations. Engaging the trauma of so many families with the expectation that the Words of scripture are trustworthy and true and can lead us all to become repairers of the breath. Visions do that - they paint a picture of the world as it could be, the world as it should be - watering the most parched of our places when the world is harsh and untenable.

And the beautiful vision at the end of Isaiah is especially satiating after the 39 blistering chapters of judgment at the beginning of the book. Thirty-nine chapters of rant from a prophet whose words were all about what the people had done wrong, all about a verdict delivered from the Lord with a sentence of exile imposed in harsh and unforgiving rhetoric. I prefer the vision without the tension on the front end. I prefer the vision without the harsh rhetoric. I prefer the vision without the threats and the shouting that precede it.

Indeed this part of Isaiah - the 3rd and final part of the book - is supposed to be emptied of the judgment. The first part of Isaiah is all judgment. The second part is mostly about the promise of return. This 3rd and final part is supposed to be all about restoration. Yet here comes the prophet with fire in his mouth:

–“Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.” “they ask of me righteous judgments; they want God on their side.” “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” (58:3)

Answer: you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. (58:4)

The fast that will get God on your side, the prophet goes on to say, is not a bunch of smoke and mirrors. It's loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the straps of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free, breaking every yoke. It's sharing food with the hungry and getting homes for the homeless, and tending to the poor. (58:6,7)

If we want to realize the vision, the prophet is saying, we've got to do things differently than we've done them in the past. And apparently the whole book of Isaiah is proof that if a community wants to do things differently than it's done them in the past, tension is needed to move them there. The tension of judgment on the current practices that keep us in uninterrupted cycles of doing things the way we've always done them in the present even though we say we want a different future. The tension of anger at the current way of doing things over and over that aren't leading in the direction that God wants us to go.

"Shout out; do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins." (Isaiah 58:1)

So I know I shouldn't be surprised this past week when I found myself incredibly frustrated and angry on a call with the Mayor's staff as they started to waver and wobble on standing with all of us at a press conference that will take place on February 16 announcing the two things that are essential to change our city's trajectory:

- the creation of a state-authorized special purpose entity to address the systemic problem of 70,000 vacant properties at its roots;
- and the targeted investment of public dollars in a strategic, community-led way to leverage billions of dollars of additional private investment to rid our city of its vacants once and for all.

Making the changes that we'd been talking about together for nearly two years to attend to the vision that everybody says they want to see in our city - neighborhoods rebuilt and right-sized, wealth restored, vacants eliminated, people allowed to stay in their homes - the vision that everybody says they want until we begin to understand just how much we'd have to all change to get there.

I shouldn't have been surprised but I was surprised. Surprised and angry for all the meetings, the time, the power - your power - and the power of so many other people of faith and community leaders who have put blood, sweat and tears into walking the streets, meeting with agency heads, corporate leaders, municipal bonding experts, state legislators, and the top vacancy experts in the country - all that work - 121 page report scheduled to be released this Thursday - all that to run up against business as usual in Baltimore. The slow grinding down of neighborhoods and leaders who are tired of the status quo.

I was surprised, I must confess, because like so many white, middle class people I was raised to believe that if you have all the facts, do all the right research, talk to all the right people, that's what leads to change. And despite a couple of decades of on the ground training to the contrary, it's very hard for me to let go of my miseducation. I would like to live in a world, where the *vision* of the prophets *alone* is what leads to

change, not the raised voices, the judgment on the current ways of doing business, the public tension that precedes the change. I don't like creating tension.

I can see myself in those middle class white clergymen who Dr. King critiqued from that Birmingham jail so many years ago for preferring "a negative peace which is the absence of tension, he wrote, to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."¹ I can see myself in some of our public leaders who use most of their elite education to communicate to us what we can't do instead of working to accomplish what we *must do* together. I can see myself in those who measure their success by the absence of tension above all else.

Except that I don't want to be living in a city where firefighters get killed by a vacant roof that collapses a block from where I live. Where people start fires inside of vacants to stay warm, and murderers hide the bodies of their victims. I don't want to double down on my call to ministry in Baltimore only to discover years from now that things didn't get better they got worse.

The city needs the tension to shake us out of our acceptance of this mess. Our acceptance of 300+ murders a year. Our acceptance of 70,000 vacant properties. Our acceptance of absentee owners and speculators that buy up property and don't fix it up. Our acceptance of a government that doesn't take bold action to fix the problems it created many decades ago. Our acceptance of the Black wealth inequalities that are driven so much by the housing crisis. Our acceptance of the way things are.

Which is why, despite my aversion to tension, at the end of the day I know I'm going to choose the path that Rev. Marion Bascom and Bishop Douglas Miles encouraged me to take - the one where it's better to be respected than to be liked. I'm going to remember Jesus at the table, the one who loved Isaiah's visions, quoting from him more than any other prophet as he turned over tables and upset polite company to change our world for the better. I'm going to gird up my loins in the words of scripture for another fight to stand with the Black Church that's always known what Frederick Douglass wrote that power concedes nothing without a demand. I'm going to remember Fannie Lou Hamer reminding us that sometimes you've got to upset this apple cart to move things forward.

And if you feel as frustrated, angry, and as hopeful as I do that the Lord can make us strong like a watered garden that grows beautiful people, that our ancient ruins can and will be rebuilt, that he Lord will satisfy us in the parched places and make our bones strong, you can join me, too, Feb. 16 - 11am - at the Greater Harvest Baptist Church where my friend and colleague the Rev. Brent Brown has been trying to do something about the 8 vacants across the street from his church for years. We can stand together in all the tension that prophets taught us is necessary to become repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in.

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 1963, quoted from memory.