

SERMON TITLE: "Starting the New Year Well: Societally"
SERMON TEXT: Isaiah 58:1-12
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 5, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Yesterday, at least eight of us from this church participated in the pro-immigrant and pro-refugee rally that marched from the Union Depot to the Ogden Municipal Building. We carried signs with Bible verses like Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:35, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," and Hebrews 13:2, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers."

Our participation in that social justice rally goes along with our United Methodist heritage. As our *Book of Discipline* indicates, our earliest Methodist leaders were engaged in advocacy for the poor and disadvantaged. For John Wesley, our father in faith, there was "no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness."* The heart-warming grace of Christ and the spiritual disciplines and piety that John Wesley preached and exemplified were not just for the personal salvation of individual sinners. Those Methodist emphases of faith and holiness were also for mission and service and the transformation of the world.

Ever since January first, I've been preaching about starting the New Year well. We've talked about how to be well mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and creatively. All five of those ways were pretty individual. Like New Year's resolutions, we could choose—with God's help—to make healthier decisions and put our own mind, body, and spirit to work practicing some better personal habits. What I want to talk about with you today is different. While we still have to choose individually whether or not we're going to engage in this issue, this kind of wellness is not just about us. This week, we're talking about starting the New Year well societally.

1—ISAIAH 58

Our scripture text from Isaiah 58 spells out this societal need and obligation pretty clearly. Hundreds of years before Christ, the prophet spoke out about the ills of his society. The people of God were complaining that God wasn't paying attention to them. They thought they were seeking God in all the right ways—including fasting, humbling themselves, wearing scratchy sackcloth, and lying in ashes. And yet, they didn't see the results they were looking for. They didn't think God was blessing them as much as they deserved.

Apparently, however, God didn't buy this line of reasoning. God didn't believe the Jews were sincere in their hearts because their practice of spiritual rituals produced no improvement in their practice of social behaviors. In fact, in Isaiah 58:3, the prophet pointed out that, on the very same day that the Jews were fasting, they were oppressing their workers. On the very same day that they were supposedly worshiping God, they were quarrelling and fighting and striking others with a wicked fist.

It wasn't that God was opposed to spiritual practices such as fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. But God wanted to see more than self-serving individualistic acts of religious ritual. God wanted to see the kind of religious behavior that, first of all, stops abusing the vulnerable and powerless and then actively improves their lives. If you want to be blessed by God, said the prophet Isaiah, then you need to bless the lives of the hungry, the naked, the poor, and the homeless.

We see this clearly in Isaiah 58:6-7, where the prophet spoke God's rhetorical questions. "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

When God's people would do that, said Isaiah, that's when they would see the light shining on them. That's when their gloom would be lifted. That's when healing would come to them. That's when

they would experience vindication. That's when the glory of the Lord would protect them and strengthen their bones. Only when the Jews would remove the constraints that kept others poor and oppressed, would God answer the Jews' cries for help. Only after the Jews cared for the needs of the afflicted would their societal infrastructure be rebuilt, their streets be safe, and their country become great again.

Do you hear what the Prophet Isaiah was saying? His Jewish people weren't going to lift themselves up by putting or keeping other people down. According to Isaiah's understanding of how God worked in the world, there was no such thing as trickle down blessings. The only way the situation would improve at the top was if the top percentage of people first made serious efforts to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the bottom percentage. A strong society is built from the bottom up. Or, as Jesus later said in Matthew 25, "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do unto me." Whatever we do to help those who are suffering the most will provide the sure foundation upon which the kingdom, or society, of God can be built.

2—APPLICATION TODAY

OK. So, the biblical message is pretty clear that the way to start the New Year well societally is to care about the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the hungry, and the homeless. But society is so big, and the problems are so difficult. Where and how do we begin?

Well, let me say, first of all, thanks to all of you who brought canned and dry food for our Souper Bowl of Caring food drive. And, I'm glad to see that some of you got the message through email and Facebook about the Lantern House homeless shelter's need for milk. As Michelle Perry told us in the announcements, the Lantern House's milk-buying grant has run out and won't be reinstated until March. So, during this month of February, they could really use some donations of milk. The Lantern House is located just west of Wall Avenue on 33rd Street. Take the milk directly to the Lantern House at 269 W 33rd Street to ensure its freshness. Or bring it to church on Sundays for quick delivery.

Donating food and milk is a good way to begin. But improving the big problems of our society can't be done just by making individual donations. None of us is that rich. We also have to get involved in the public square. We have to enter into city hall. We have to march up to Capitol Hill. We have to engage in dialog, debate, and the determination of public policy. We have to vote and speak out and apply pressure, so that our elected officials act according to the prophetic values Jesus taught. And, to be effective, we have to unite ourselves so that our concerns are actually heard.

That's why I'm asking you to get on board this month with the Coalition of Religious Communities. CORC is the interfaith group here in Utah that combines the compassion of Christians of various denominations along with Latter Day Saints, Jews, Unitarian-Universalists, Muslims, and others in public advocacy for the poor. Every February, we use our collective power to influence the Utah State Legislature. Every Tuesday and Thursday throughout the month, we ask people of various faith groups to go to the capitol to learn about the issues and processes and then to seek ways to influence our legislators.

Sometimes we work to discourage particular pieces of legislation that would hurt the poor. Other times we encourage particular pieces of legislation that would improve life for the sick, the homeless, and the underemployed. One year, we fought hard to limit the destructive practices of payday lenders. Last year, we put our efforts toward a very small, but helpful expansion of Medicaid.

This year, we're focusing our efforts on ending child homelessness. Why child homelessness? Because any amount of time living in the anxiety of homelessness causes brain damage to young children. Child homelessness radically increases the likelihood of lifelong learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral problems, social dysfunction, substance abuse, and under-employment--things that I know all too well from the wretched and severely handicapping experience of my own children adopted after too many years spent in homelessness and poverty.

On first hearing, I know that ending child homelessness sounds like an overly optimistic goal. But, if you look at the bulletin insert, you can see that in the 2016 “point-in-time survey,” there were 620 homeless children identified in Utah. Over the course of a year, that number would be multiplied by five. While that number is large enough that it should be a moral concern to all people of faith, the number is also small enough that it should be reasonably possible to overcome—if we really put our hearts, minds, and efforts into this cause.

CONCLUSION

So, I invite you, I encourage you, I plead with you to participate in this effort. If at all possible, go with us to the Capitol on February 23 for United Methodist Faith Day. Help us make a strong impression on our elected leaders. If you can’t go on February 23, go another day. I guarantee you that the Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Jews won’t mind you joining forces with them. If you can’t go to the state capitol at all, then call or write your elected officials. We’re all in this together. As the Prophet Isaiah says, God is calling us to move beyond our self-centered individualistic religious rituals and worship God in a way that actively improves our society for all people. In every way that we can, we need to exert our influence on behalf of the poor and homeless, so that all of us can start this New Year well societally.

**The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (Nashville: The UM Publ. House, 2016), p. 54.*