February 2nd, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Epiphany 2

10:30am

The Back Breaking Bar

1. Three parts of Isaiah

This morning we come to a familiar passage, a passage of prophecy from Isaiah, which is enhanced by our Gospel reading this morning. This passage can easily be broken down into three parts: this dynamic shift from dark to light, which is a common metaphor in Scripture. Then we have this increased joy and harvest, the sense of new life and new beginnings. And finally, we hear that the bar across the shoulders, the very weight in their lives and our lives, are broken down when this new light comes into the world.

In seminary, I was taught to write this three-point sermon, your three points to bring home – all sealed in a lovely package, with a little bit of explanation at each point. Sometimes this methodology is totally appropriate, but in this case, I think I would be doing a great disservice to each part if I didn’t give it the gravity of importance that each point would be worth.

So, for reasons unbeknownst to me, led by the Spirit’s guiding, I felt like I really need to address the last part of this Isaiah passage. This idea of this weight, this bar, which is such strong imagery, to be lifted off the shoulders of the people then, and us today and how that realization might change the way we live and love and serve.

II. What bar lies across their shoulders?

For the folks who are living to hear Isaiah’s words, they are needing to hear these words desperately. They are living in a time when there is tremendous fear – a time of distress and darkness, because the Assyrians have entered and attacked the northern kingdom. The passage right after the one we read this morning talks about the boots of the tramping warriors and garments rolled in blood. The people are in the middle of oppressive military occupation and the darkness that they feel is valid and anguished. They feel this bar across their shoulders – again, there’s such imagery here – these steel or metal bar, confining their shoulders, stuck, immovable, heavy, and painful to carry.

Isaiah is offering hope in the midst of that pain – to say that the bar will be broken, as this hopeful prophecy of things to come. Maybe not in lifetime, maybe not for them to see, but maybe to know that something better would come for their children and their children’s children.

III. What is the bar across our shoulders?

So, now that Jesus has been born, has come into our world, the yoke of our burden, the bar across our shoulders is meant to be broken, for in Christ, we find our freedom and grace and salvation that binds up the wounds of back breaking bars and heals us again and again.

Or, at least that’s the idea – that’s the idea of the kingdom to come, but maybe not an apt reflection of the world we live in right now.

I don’t know about you, but I definitely feel the bar across my shoulders. Let me put some tangible language to that. Sometimes I feel the back breaking bar when I’m under pressure, when society’s expectations of me are too grand. For you, maybe that bar is being a teacher and wanting to give our children all the wonder and knowledge in the world, but you are contained and confined by a curriculum that doesn’t feed our children’s souls, but puts a bar of testing across their back. For you, maybe it’s being in the workplace and knowing that there are oppressive systems in place where hierarchy is abused for the privileged, and you hold that bar, feeling stuck, not in a place to change the systematic dynamic. For you, perhaps the bar is the stress of the day, the demands on your time, and feeling stuck with no place to breathe.

We know that long bar across our shoulders, and we know that there are others around this world who feel the weight of that bar in oppressive and challenging ways. For those who live in areas where there has been natural disaster, but no assistance or very little, they carry the bar of living day to day. For those who are in situations of human trafficking, where a person is acknowledged a thing, as currency, the deep wounds of tension and oppression that are real and lasting. For those who live with illness or injury, whose medical debt is climbing, and there’s no way to see a way out – that bar is heavy.

IV. Where is the Hope?

And I could go on and on, and continue to significantly bum us out for the rest of the sermon, but here’s the pitch, here’s the important part: the bar is meant to be broken. I sometimes wonder if Jesus looks down on this world and says, ‘I came for a reason, I came so that light would shine and that back breaking bar would be broken. I came and lived among you, I died for you, I offered you the sweet and gracious gift of salvation, and yet you are still there carrying the bar. My beloved, I came to fulfill prophecy – I came so all that would be free and unified and healed. I love you, but why aren’t you living into the salvation I gave unto you out of great love?’

Why did Jesus come to earth? Why was He human and divine? What was the point if we aren’t willing to live into the prophetic promises that have been around for all this time? Why are we not seeking the kingdom daily and why are we letting it go?

You can say to me – well, Pastor Becca, that’s just not how society is – that’s just not how it worked out. It’s free will, what are you going to do? And I say...choosing my words carefully – that’s just not good enough. I’m sorry, it’s just not good enough. It’s not good enough to sit in the pews and for me to sit up here and say – well, Jesus came, but that’s the way it is – it’s a shame.

V. A Call to Outrage

My friends, the bar across your shoulders – Jesus came – it doesn’t need to be there. The bar across our brother and sister’s shoulders? It doesn’t need to be there either. Jesus came for a reason, Jesus came to offer salvation.

So what are we going to do, how are we going to respond as a faithful people who have been offer this incredible gift and grace? We are going to act. We are going to challenge societal norms and say – enough, enough – my life is defined by Christ. Maybe we need to get a bit mad – a healthy anger. As I think about the teachers who have to teach to testing – what if we wrote letters, what if stood alongside one another, what if we acknowledge that our kids deserve a real and factual education that forms them, body, mind and soul? What if we saw the pain of our brothers and sisters and instead of turning of the news, which yes you need to do sometimes, but what if we went and served alongside of them, what if we helped to lighten the strain across both our backs?

The message, the true conviction and challenge this morning is real and poignant, and requires deep reflection and action, and here it is: Jesus came into this world, to fulfill prophecy, to change the way we live and breath, and Jesus came to offer salvation and offers us a life of freedom from the strain. We know that our world is not in alignment with that kingdom vision, so what gets you riled up? What are you called to do in the here and now, for Christ has come, so let the Spirit lead on and lead you to deep abiding action that makes Christ’s salvation mean something to us in a tangible way. Amen.