

“Do those folks really worship the same God I do?” Have any of you ever asked yourself that? I ask it. Often. That’s why this poem I came across this week was so timely.

I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven’s door, not by the beauty of it all, nor the lights or its decor.

But it was the folks in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp—the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the troublemakers and trash.

There stood the kid from seventh grade who swiped my lunch money twice. Next to him was my old neighbor who never said anything nice.

Joe, who I had always thought was rotting away in Hell, was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well.

I nudged Jesus, and asked “What’s the deal? I’d love to hear your take. How’d all these sinners get up here? God must’ve made a mistake. And why is everyone so quiet, so somber—give me a clue.”

“Child,” He said, “they’re all in shock. They weren’t expecting you!”

(Folks in Heaven, J. Taylor Ludwig)

Our scripture text this morning is taken from Isaiah 61:1-3:

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,

2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,

3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

This is Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

These words were written as the Jewish people began to return from exile, to their beloved Jerusalem. Yet the return wasn't quite what the people had hoped.

The nation was divided, leaders played to privilege, justice was for sale and iniquity persisted. And so to this, Isaiah speaks powerful words of hope, of God's favor and an overturning of the established social order.

After the events of the last several weeks, we're all in need of some good news and a sense of the Lord's favor. We've been broken hearted and

have had cause to mourn: for the lost lives in Ukraine and Buffalo and in Uvalde.

This morning, we long for God's comfort, for the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and garland instead of ashes.

One of the old and magnificent castles of Ireland came to a strange end. It was the ancient home of the Castlereagh family, and was one of the most princely residences on the Emerald Isle.

But the home had fallen into decay and was no longer inhabited. The usual happened.

When the peasants wanted to repair a road, build a chimney, or pig sty, they'd scavenge stone from the fine old castle. After all, the stones were already cut, finished and fit. Best of all, they were available without having to dig and carry other stones for miles.

One day, Lord Londonderry, the last surviving descendant and heir of the Castlereagh family, visited the castle.

When he saw the state of his ancestral home, he determined to end immediately the robbery of the castle for its stones.

So, Lord Londonderry sent for his agent and gave orders for the castle

to be enclosed with a six-foot wall to keep the trespassers out.

Afterwards, he then went on his way.

We, too, have put up some walls for what we thought would protect us. We've put a wall up on our Southern border.

There's also a wall for those who disagree on guns or abortion or healthcare or women's rights or sexual orientation or the death penalty or just about anything else we can disagree on.

And, how's that worked out for us? Well, it's of course, divided us into us and them. We're a divided nation.

So, let me ask you this: Are you brave enough, like Isaiah, to challenge the structures of power in our own society and bring good news to the oppressed, the outsiders, especially those we've walled off, rejected, and, for all intents and purposes, thrown away? For instance, are you willing to work to end racism in all its forms?

The great replacement theory that helped motivate the 18-year-old alleged gunman at a Buffalo supermarket last Saturday is often presented as nothing more than a fringe ideology.

But hear this: many have embraced the core fears at the heart of this

demonic ideology as an organizing truth in their politics, their lives and their futures to explain a future that feels out of their control.

A recent poll found the great replacement theory has gone mainstream, with 1/3 of United States adults saying they think there's a deliberate effort to replace whites with minorities and immigrants in our country.

Some are working overtime to amplify the fear that white people are losing their place as the comfortable majority in the United States. That's why it's up to us white people to work overtime to fight and counter it.

My white sisters and brothers, do you have the courage to fight it? What about to call out racist comments when you hear them from friends, your parents, your children?

Black lives matter. But sometimes, someone will say in response, "All lives matter." And, they're right. All lives do matter. But, it logically follows that all lives will not matter until black lives matter, too.

I sincerely believe that we, with the help of the Holy Spirit of God, can be part of proclaiming a year of God's favor to all, of bringing good news of freedom to the oppressed. I've given just one example. There are many more.

In this morning's text, the prophet Isaiah also calls us to help bind up the

brokenhearted and provide comfort to those who mourn.

In one fell swoop on Tuesday, an 18-year old in Uvalde with two AR style rifles snuffed out the jokes, dances and hamming it up for camera shots or TikTok videos at Robb Elementary School.

He killed the freshly minted honor roll recipients, aspiring athletes, basketball playera, and a softball second baseman. Their laughter and sass, their love of drawing, their accumulation of dollar bills for a trip to Disney World are all gone.

Grief is not something I learned about in a book or in a seminary class. It's something I've lived and experienced first hand too many times. Standing in the presence of other people's grief is part of my calling. I know what heartache sounds like. I imagine that you do, too.

And let me confess something to you, I dread the days ahead.

I've had my fill of thoughts and prayers and marches and protests and prayer vigils and lowered flags and all of the rest when there's yet another school shooting.

It's time we do something more concrete, to do all we can to stop them and make them less lethal.

But, instead, we've somehow gotten ourselves trapped into a pointless circle of finger-pointing, political stammering, and virtue posting, soon followed by . . . nothing. We've made the unbearable routine. And, active shooter drills in schools are the norm.

May God save us from empty promises, and instead give us and our leaders a backbone.

Perhaps we'll be compelled to watch the funerals and feel the weight of child-sized caskets this week.

May God make us look. And remember. And then give us strategies and guts and trust for each other. May God somehow, someday, someday very soon give us everything we need to free us from this violence.

Our nation is divided on this issue. But, this is an affliction to be cured, not a message to be managed by our political leaders.

It's a moral failure. We need some leaders who're profiles in courage. And, I need to say this: our faith ought to inform how we choose who to vote for as our leaders. Enough is enough.

I remember a few years ago when the rules started rolling out about smoking in public. I also remember most when the rules came out about not

smoking in bars. I said at the time, “It’ll never happen.” But, it did.

You see, we really can change for the better. Perhaps, we can make the guns of school shooting and other mass killings the cigarettes of the 21st century.

Perhaps it’d be good if God permanently imprints the images onto our too easily distracted minds of the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts, grandmas and grandpas crying and missing their ten-year old this morning.

May God use us to bind up the broken-hearted and comfort those who mourn.

The prophet Isaiah, in chapter 61, also speaks of liberty. *“[T]he world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around. . . . But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars. And I see God working in . . . a way that [folks], in some strange way, are responding — something is happening in our world.*

The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, . . . the cry is always the same — “We want to be free.”

That’s a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I’ve Been to the

Mountaintop” speech, which he delivered in support of the striking sanitation workers at Masonic Temple in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968 — the day before he was assassinated.

Bryan Stephenson told a powerful personal story last month here in Greenville at a United Ministries event. The story is also in his book, “Just Mercy.” It’s a story of his meeting a man on death row when he “was a twenty-three-year-old student at Harvard Law School working in Georgia on an internship, eager and inexperienced and worried that [he] was in over [his] head.”

Here’s Stephenson’s story in his own words: *“I’m Henry,” [the prisoner] said. . . .*

“I’m really sorry, I’m really sorry, uh . . . I can’t tell you very much, but I don’t know very much.”

[Henry] looked at me worriedly. “Is everything all right with my case?”

“Oh, yes, sir. The lawyers . . . sent me down to tell you that . . . we don’t have a lawyer for you yet, but you’re not at risk of execution anytime in the next year. . . .

[Henry] . . . quickly grabb[ed] my hands.

“I’m not going to have an execution date anytime in the next year?”

“No, sir. They said it would be at least a year before you get an execution date.”

Those words didn’t sound very comforting to me. But Henry just squeezed my hands tighter and tighter. “Thank you, man. I mean, really, thank you! This is great news.”

His shoulders unhunched, and he looked at me with intense relief in his eyes.

“You are the first person I’ve met in over two years after coming to death row who is not another death row prisoner or a death row guard. I’m so glad you’re here, and I’m so glad to get this news.”

He exhaled loudly and seemed to relax.

“I’ve been talking to my wife on the phone, but I haven’t wanted her to come and visit me or bring the kids because I was afraid they’d show up and I’d have an execution date. I just don’t want them here like that. Now I’m going to tell them they can come and visit. Thank you!”

I was astonished that he was so happy. I relaxed, too, and we began

to talk. . . .

We kept talking and talking, and it was only when I heard a loud bang on the door that I realized I'd stayed way past my allotted time for the legal visit. I looked at my watch. I'd been there three hours. . . . [A prison guard] began handcuffing Henry, pulling his hands together behind his back and locking them there.

Then he roughly shackled Henry's ankles. The guard was so angry he put the cuffs on too tight. I could see Henry grimacing with pain.

I said, "I think those cuffs are on too tight. Can you loosen them, please?"

Henry gave me a smile and said, "It's okay, Bryan. Don't worry about this. Just come back and see me again, okay?"

He looked so calm. Then he did something completely unexpected. I watched him close his eyes and tilt his head back. I was confused by what he was doing, but then he opened his mouth and I understood. He began to sing. . . .

I'm pressing on, the upward way

New heights I'm gaining, every day

Still praying as, I'm onward bound

Lord, plant my feet on Higher Ground

Although there was still a prison wall around Henry, God had set his spirit free.

Some of us are in a prison, too. One of my prisons is perfectionism. What's yours? Anger. Abuse. Addiction. Alcoholism. Pride. People pleasing. Unhealthy relationships. Whatever it is, God proclaims liberty to we captives and wants to release us from our prisons. God wants to set us free so that we can move on to higher ground.

Do you ever wonder, as the song Bronwyn sang earlier, what it would mean to be free? Free from the prisons that hold us and the walls that separate us. Free from racism and bigotry. Free from gun violence. Free from injustice.

As I mentioned earlier, Lord Londonderry instructed his agent to build a wall to protect his castle. Three or four years later, he returned. And, to his astonishment, the castle was gone. All that was left was a huge wall enclosing nothing. The Lord sent for his agent and demanded to know why his orders hadn't been carried out. Yet, his agent insisted they had.

“But, where’s the castle?” Lord Londonderry asked.

“My Lord, I built the wall with the bricks from the castle. Was it for me to be going miles for bricks to build the wall when the finest stones in all of Ireland were already beside me?”

Lord Londonderry had his wall. But the wall, without the castle, meant nothing.

In continuing to build the walls that we build to separate us from those who are unlike us, walls concerning race, wall regarding guns, walls separating us from those who disagree with us, if we’re not careful, we’ll be in the ridiculous position of Lord Londonderry. We’ll have a wall, but there’ll be no castle. No country as we know it today.

I’ve long feared that if this country as we know it now ever comes to an end, it’ll not be Russia’s nuclear bomb or something such as that.

No, I think it’ll be an inside job. Our biggest threat is not from without, but from within.

The constant sniping, accusing, and lying are doing untold damage to our country.

If our country comes to an end, it’ll be because of the walls we put up

to keep us from them—whatever us and them are. And, when's it all said and done, we'll end up with a wall without a castle.

Finally, here's the take home message. In Isaiah 61, God calls us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, and to proclaim liberty to the captives.

So, let's agree that all folks will not matter until black lives matter. We must do all we can to combat racism.

Let's make the guns of school shooting and other mass killings the cigarettes of the 21st century.

And, let's, like Henry, always press on to higher ground.

Sisters and brothers, let's commit to do what we can to bring the walls down.

THIS IS THE GOSPEL.

THIS IS THE GOOD

AND, IT'S TRUE.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

AMEN.