

Doing Justice, the Gateway to JOY

Isaiah 58:1-14

During my years of pastoring, I have had two encounters that radically transformed my view of ministry. The first occurred on July 18, 1988, when I met the Romanian poet, Traian Dorz, and discovered the power of poetry to unlock grief in a way that doesn't deny or obliterate it, but rather transcends it by naming and embracing it in the presence of God and his people. Coming home, I realized that I had the responsibility as a pastor, not just to teach the Scriptures, but to give God's people a safe stage where they could have a voice to process their pain and testify to God's faithfulness in the presence of others.

The second transformation occurred on October 17, 2013, when Grace Kvamme invited Gary Haugen, the founder of International Justice Mission, to share his passion for "justice" to a small group of us in Fellowship Hall. In 1994, he served as the Director of the United Nations' investigation in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. The violence that he witnessed against the poor spurred Gary and a handful of others to do the impossible — to create an organization that goes where evil is done with impunity and then work with local churches and governments to 1. rescue and restore victims; 2. bring criminals to justice; 3. and repair and strengthen justice systems. I was stunned! To be honest, before Gary spoke I never thought "justice" was possible. The following year we partnered with IJM's Mumbai where Sanjay Macwan is the director. Since 2000 their office has rescued 640+ victims from sex trafficking, prosecuted 178 criminals and trained over 24,800 police, government officials and NGOs.

Today we will examine a signature text on God's heart for justice and the strategy he uses to get his people involved in this holy work, who surprisingly have no interest in being part of it. In fact God and his people are not even on speaking terms. The people are disgruntled because, during their painful years as refugees in exile, they have been meticulous and extremely zealous in their religious observances, but they find that God pays absolutely no attention—"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why have we afflicted ourselves and you don't even notice?" God is not present, nor does he answer their prayers (vv. 4, 9). In response, God summons the prophet to make a dramatic declaration with the force of a ram's horn (*shophar*), where he unfolds three steps to bring his people home.

1. Repentance: Exposing sin (1-5)
2. Redefining true religion: Not ritual but relationships (6-7)
3. Resurrecting our imagination and igniting our hope (8-14)

I. Repentance: Exposing Sin (Isa 58:1-3a ESV)

A. Ritual with no Reward (1-3a)

- 1 “Cry aloud; do not hold back;
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.**
- 2 Yet they seek me daily,
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that did righteousness
and did not forsake the judgment of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they delight to draw near to God.**
- 3a ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you take no knowledge of it?’”**

The *shophar* was the ancient equivalent of an air raid siren. Its piercing blast is a sign to drop everything and pay attention, because what the prophet is about to say is a life-or-death matter—so we had better get it right. There is a massive disconnect between the people’s commitment to the rituals of religion and the utter lack of transformation in their relationships. As Jim Martin affirms in his book *The Just Church*, “when these two spheres are pulled far enough apart, what breeds in the middle ground is hypocrisy.”¹

In this case the hypocrisy is so insidious, it has blinded them to their depravity. God rebukes them with scathing sarcasm as he describes how they see themselves when they look in the mirror. In their eyes their lives are the ideal expression of what it means to love God with the whole heart (they *delight* to know his ways ... they *delight* to draw near in prayer) and to love to one’s neighbor by their commitment to righteousness and justice.

Righteousness and justice refer to right relationships with God and one another so that the community flourishes in every respect, including the environment. A righteous person is one whose primary concern is for the welfare of the community and who serves the good of others at his or her expense. A wicked person is concerned

about themselves and serves themselves at the expense of the community. The Ten Commandments are worded from the standpoint of *my responsibilities, not my rights*. Rights are implicit, but the focus is not maintaining my rights, but protecting my neighbor's rights. My neighbor has a right to his life, therefore "you shall not murder;" he or she has a right to a home, therefore "you shall not commit adultery;" he or she has a right to possessions, therefore "you shall not steal." Any time I assert my rights at the expense of the community, that is wickedness.

The Hebrew word for justice is *mishpat*. In their book *The Justice Calling*, Bethany Hanke and Kristen Johnson explain,

This word comes into play when things have gone wrong with God's original vision of *shalom* and restoration is needed...When a situation is not going according to the way of life God intends for his people or creation, judicial intervention may be needed to help make things right. *Mishpat* can also be defined as the restoration of a situation or environment so that equity and harmony are promoted in the community. Simply put, *mishpat* means setting things right.²

Doing righteousness and justice is the ultimate purpose for which we worship and the goal for which we pray, "May your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). Like Paul prior to his conversion, the people would boast that they were "as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil 3:6). But God responds, "You need your eyes examined!"

B. Exposing Hypocrisy and Oppression (3b-5)

**3b "Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.**

**4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.**

**Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.**

**5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD?"**

Like a surgeon with a scalpel in hand, God places the patient on the operating table and cuts him open, exposing a malignant cancer that has spread throughout in his body. Contrary to their accusation that God doesn't see or take note of them, he thunders back a double "Behold, behold" this is what *I see*.

You may think your rituals should bring special favor with me, but what *I see* are your workers who work long hours for meager wages and never get a day off. While you're at church singing, *I see* them sweating in your warehouses in unsafe working conditions and inadequate protection from the virus. *I also see* how you respond to whistle blowers or anyone who gives you a word of correction for the good of your employees—you unleash your attorneys to battle it out in court (*ri'b* = "legal dispute"); if that fails, you go on the attack with murderous slander campaigns ("*strike with the fist*"). *I see* your worship as a cold and calculated public display of manipulation to increase your power, position, and possessions. And you expect me to answer your prayers?

This is why God is so furious and why Jesus had scathing words for the Pharisees. Jesus was tender with sinners, but when those in authority used religion to elevate their status and wealth by oppressing the poor, he didn't hold back.

As we witness the patient, now laid bare and exposed in all his sin, we wonder if there is any hope for recovery, or are they terminal? What happens next is not what we would expect. Instead of thundering down with condemnation and judgment, God gives them a vision of the road home and the manifold blessings that pour forth when his people join him in doing the holy work of justice. The poetic cadences are structured with an "*if... then*" format in three repetitive stanzas, making God's fatherly appeal ring in their ears. This is God's "I have a dream" speech.

II. Redefining True Religion: Liberate the Oppressed (58:6-7)

- 6 "Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?"**
- 7 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 him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"**

God redefines the word “fast” from the idea of *disciplined ritual* to acts of *sacrificial love* for one’s *neighbor* that liberate them from oppression whenever they are denied resources necessary for life. Walter Brueggemann elaborates,

The action commanded here is a “true fast;” it requires doing without, denying self, and giving things up in obedience...a decision against self-indulgence. The double term “yoke” likely refers to disproportionate indebtedness that placed some members of the community in hock to others. To “undo” and “let go free” means to cancel paralyzing debts, thus anticipating the allusion to the practice of Jubilee in 61:1-4.³

But there’s a problem. You can’t liberate the poor from oppression if you can’t see them. In Luke 16, Jesus tells the story of a rich man who built a massive wall around his home to protect and insulate him from all the unpleasantness of the world outside. When a poor man named Lazarus, who was starving and sick, came to his home, seeking to eat from whatever fell from the rich man’s table, he couldn’t get past the gate. Even the dogs demonstrated more mercy upon Lazarus and licked his wounds, while the rich man feasted sumptuously every day, oblivious that there was a stranger starving and who eventually died at this gate.

To protect ourselves from the coronavirus, we have been living in isolation. But the metaphor is equally as apt when our lives were “normal.” We live isolated and insulated lives with formidable walls built into the economic fabric of our valley, not to mention the ones we personally erect to insulate us from anything that makes us uncomfortable. We don’t see the oppressed.

To breakdown our walls, the poet’s vivid imagery pulls us into the scene so that we encounter the oppressed with all five senses. This is what IJM does as they document their rescues. First you see a young girl, 14 years old, trapped in the basement a brothel. Going downstairs you find her curled up in a corner, her clothes torn, her hair uncombed. When she looks up at her rescuer, her eyes seem so innocent. Ever so gently, they remove the duct tape over her mouth and cut the zip ties that bind her hands behind her back. She stands and is shaking. She is quietly led up the stairs and out the door of her nightmare. Stepping outside, it takes her eyes a few moments to adjust in the light of day. In the distance is her abuser, cuffed and stuffed into a police van. Her yoke of slavery has been permanently broken. Tears simultaneously roll down her cheek and yours. JUSTICE!

Setting the oppressed free is the first step of doing justice. The second step is to heal the wounds and restore the dignity of the oppressed by bringing them into a safe and nurturing community. Notice in v. 6 the poet invited us into the world of the oppressed; now in v. 7, the oppressed are invited into our world to share in all that we have. Note the progression of intimacy: sharing meals, inviting them into your home; covering them with your clothes. "Not hiding your face from your own flesh," suggests that you've transformed the hungry, homeless and naked into intimate members of your "family."

If the prophet's words seem overwhelming to you, let me suggest two easy onramps to the daunting task of justice. Listen to someone's story. By someone, I mean a person you know, whose background is different than yours. Suspend your presuppositions and fixed categories and just listen. Spend a day in their shoes and walk the road they walked to see life from their perspective. Stories are the bridges that take us safely across the divide of prejudice and hate, and it has been the key to IJM's success in combating slavery. Giving someone a voice with no agenda is a gift that lights up the soul, feeds intimacy and awakens love.

The second is to pray the Psalms. The Psalms are a collection of 150 inspired prayers, spanning 1000 years of salvation history. Fifty-three of them are psalms of lament. When you pray them you will hear the voice of the poor and the oppressed as they cry out to God for justice. Hearing them will not only give you compassion for oppressed but, more importantly, appreciation for the suffering that Christ endured on our behalf.

III. Resurrecting our Hope (58:8-14)

A. Light, Healing and Safety (8-9a)

**8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.**

**9a Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'"**

"The first 'then' of verse 8 anticipates immense well-being, here defined as 'light,' healing, protection (vindication), and safety."⁴ The worshippers wanted to be seen by God; now they will be noticed and cared for by him. He will be their protector, the one who guarantees their well-being and safety. Brueggemann notes that "This is

how “social security” really works.” Well-being comes only in a community of neighbors. The second consequence is that God will be fully present among them and readily available to answer their prayers. Which is everything they had wanted. This is the deepest spiritual need we have, to enjoy full communion with God that eliminates the feeling of being alone.

God repeats the conditions and consequences two more times. As we listen, the requirements remain the same, but the benefits become more expansive, rewarding and enticing. This is the voice of a father begging his children to come home.

B. God unleashes his power and presence (9b-12)

**9b “If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
10 if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
11 And the LORD will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
12 And 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 dwell in.”**

The command to remove the yoke of oppression is restated along with the ONE thing preventing their healing—their persistent denial and defensiveness. If anyone attempts to confront them with their sin, they get buried with a tidal wave of blame, slander and verbal abuse. This is the pride of the narcissist, who cannot ever admit guilt. But God will not have it. When King David was confronted with his sin of adultery, he simply said, “I sinned,” and then composed Psalm 51. The righteous person welcomes correction and rebuke, as the sages wrote:

**Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness;
let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head;
let my head not refuse it. (Ps 141:5)
Faithful are the wounds of a friend;
profuse are the kisses of an enemy. (Prov 27:6)**

After we remove the yoke of oppression, God specifies the level of commitment required to fully restore the oppressed. Rather than “afflicting” yourself by making yourself hungry, show your devotion to God by “pouring out your soul” for those who are truly afflicted by the crushing forces of life. To “*pour yourself out*” is not giving a 10% tithe of our wealth, but expending all our time, energy and money until the hunger of the poor is satisfied. In other words, to love your neighbor as yourself. Such a demand seems daunting, but it isn’t as difficult as you might think.

When you break down walls and enter into the world of the oppressed, God opens the floodgates of heaven and pours out the light of his presence that gives us faith, hope and self-giving love, and no darkness can put it out (John 1:5). The imagery of “darkness” and “gloom” takes us back to the familiar cadences of 9:1-2, referring to the Assyrian oppression (Isa 9:2), and the “great light” that would signal the birth of a son, whose reign would be “wonderful” and an everlasting “peace” (Isa 9:6). That peace won’t be complete until Jesus returns and evil is permanently cast into the fiery pit. But as servants of Christ’s kingdom here on earth, we have a role to play in that mission of peace and justice in the here and now. We are to be a light to those hidden in darkness.

The imagery of verse 11 evokes the memory of the Lord’s supernatural care, satisfying all Israel’s needs as he led them through the wilderness as a base for what God will do and more. The striking feature is that for those who “pour out their souls to *satisfy* the soul of the afflicted,” God will “*satisfy* your soul in scorched places.” Jesus’ disciples experienced the truth of the promise in Mark 6. After a long day teaching in a “desolate place,” they asked Jesus to send the crowds away so they could buy something to eat. Jesus responded, “You give them something to eat” (v. 37). In reluctant obedience they experienced a miraculous supply and “all ate and were satisfied” (v. 42), not to mention there were 12 baskets left over (one for each apostle). When we pour out our souls to satisfy the hunger of others, God feeds us. It is a meal where every bite is savored in communal love.

In verse 12, God promises that, despite the sin of mankind, ruin and destruction are not the last word. Jerusalem will be built again. As Oswalt observes,

If it was their sin that destroyed the city, it will be their righteousness through the grace of God that will rebuild it. God always gives us the dignity of being involved in putting back together what we have broken. We cannot do it apart from him, but he will not do it apart from us.⁵

As a result, the community will be renamed as “the repairer of the breach” and “the restorer” of the streets, two necessities needed to keep a community protected and its commerce flourishing. Brueggemann reminds us of the most important point, that “the *promise* derives from the *condition*. Restored community is not rooted primarily in bureaucracy or technology or high finance or ingenuity.”⁶ It is built upon righteousness that loves one’s neighbor as oneself. The vision of a restored community with its citizens rooted and flourishing like a new garden of Eden would seem to be “as good as it gets.” But there is still more.

C. God’s pleasure becomes your delight (13-14)

**13 “If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
and call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;
14 then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”**

Sabbath is the day we stop work and take time to adore the God who generously supplies all our needs. Sabbath is the antidote to greed and exploitation of others. It is the time we reorient our spiritual compasses to the true north of God’s gracious character, that all of life is a gift. It is a time designed for all to rest and enjoy the abundance of the creation. It is a time when we let go of anxiety and control. The benefit is found in the transformation of our affections from vain pleasures,⁷ which do not satisfy, to eternal “delight,” which transcends anything the world can offer us. As Brueggemann suggests, “The term ‘delight’ bespeaks a deep, erotic sense of well-being that is completely unencumbered by greed or oppressiveness and that takes the Lord as the ultimate source of their well-being.”⁸ As our affections are transformed, we will experience the breathless exaltation of being partners with God as “he makes the clouds his chariot, and rides on the wings of the wind” (Psa 104:3). Why would you satisfy your soul with video games when you can go skydiving with God?

The text leaves us the repetitive cadences of God’s stirring pleas resonating in our hearts “sealed with the solemn assurance of the sure word of God out of the mouth of God.”⁹

In closing I am delighted to share with you good news from the from Sanjay Macwan, the director of IJM's office in Mumbai.

A few years ago when I was in the at PBCC, I had promised the church that next time when I come, I will bring the good news that the trafficking of minor girls in public brothels is ended. I am not able to come and share the good news, but I've asked Brian to share to the congregation that **today no minor girls** are found in what was once largest brothel area in South Asia. God has used his church to end violence against young girls in Mumbai's public establishments. PBCC was and still is my first formal supporter in the fight against sex trafficking. You have prayed with and for us. You have cried on behalf of those suffering. You have sent encouragement to those of us who are in the front lines. You have loved us as your brothers, sisters and friends. This journey of justice in Mumbai is with PBCC for the Glory of God.

No Justice No Peace

Know Justice Know Peace

A Poetic Reflection on Isaiah 58-59

Michelle Burke

The Lord looks and sees
the enslaved masses groaning
the unseen child in a brothel
calling out for justice,
and he is appalled to see
that there is no justice.

For there are two parallel worlds
living side by side
where one person safely consumes
while another's life is consumed
where the pursuit of profit and entertainment
can lead to the loss of freedom for another.

Our hearts betray
our indifference
our love of comfort
our silence and complicity
where financial loss or downturn
make us more angry than oppression and despair.

May we be warned; God is not mocked,
and His wrath is kindled by injustice.
He wraps Himself in a cloak of zeal
with His mighty arm bared.
He will unleash the rushing river of justice
driven by His powerful breath.

Let us rouse ourselves
and open our eyes
and open our ears
to the painful story
of the exploited men, women and children
too tired to fight anymore.

Let us walk in their shoes
and take up their yokes
on our backs so we may know
just how heavy it has been
and how long it has been carried
so that our hearts can break.

Let us extricate ourselves
from the sticky web of finger pointing
and look within for evidence
of apathy and greed
conceived in our hearts
that we may crush it before it breeds indifference.

Spirit, breathe on us!
We need your covenant of peace
and the water of life to refresh us.
Awaken your church your bride
to see the oppressed are waiting
For us to hear their cries and act.
Lord, may your Kingdom come.

Benediction:

**Trust in the LORD, and do good;
dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.
Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will do this:
He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday. (Ps 37:3-6)**

¹ Jim Martin, *The Just Church, Becoming a Risk-taking, Justice-seeking, Disciple-making Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2012), 77.

² Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson, *The Justice Calling, Where Passion Meets Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 20-21.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, WBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 189.

⁴ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 190.

⁵ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 508.

⁶ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 192.

⁷ "talking idly," lit. "speaking a word." Some suggest this refers to gossip or wicked and slanderous talk (Prov 10:19, Ps 35:20-21; Jas 3:5).

⁸ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 193.

⁹ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 508.