

“God’s listening”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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The Rev. Andrew Foster Connors tells the story of a group of Christians who spent a cold, rainy night with the homeless. Admittedly, these kinds of expeditions are often more about making us feel good than about creating real change or real relationships. However, Connors says they were there because they wanted to encounter Christ. And they knew they weren’t going to find him in their comfortable churches; he was *out there*, with the suffering.

Drenched and shivering, the group began to look for shelter around midnight. They happened upon a church holding an all-night prayer vigil. Thinking their prayers were answered, the leader of the group—a prominent pastor—walked up to the front doors of the church. But before she could enter, she was stopped by a security guard. She told the guard that they were Christians who had no place to stay the night; they had seen the warm lights of the church and thought they might stop in to rest and pray. Connors writes, “Enticed by the lighted warmth of the sanctuary, she had forgotten that her wet, matted hair and disheveled clothing left her looking like just another homeless person from the street. The security guard was friendly but explained in brutal honesty: ‘I was hired to keep homeless people like you out.’ As the dejected group made their way back into the misery of the night, they knew they had found their suffering Christ, [and he was] locked out of the church.”

I can’t help but wonder if the people in that church were praying for the same homeless people they had barred from entering.

When we come to the Scripture text this morning, Isaiah’s people have been praying too. After a long period of exile, they have been allowed to return home. They’re back. But what they find is nothing like what they remember. The temple—Solomon’s beautiful, glorious temple, the centerpiece of their religion, the one place they knew they could always find God—is gone, destroyed long ago by the Babylonians. They have no king, no nation, no army, no wealth.

For 70 years, Israel has fasted. For 70 years, the people of Israel have begged God to hear their plight and give them justice. For 70 years, they have suffered and struggled. They cannot understand why God refuses to answer. They’ve done all the right things: they’ve prayed and fasted; they’ve performed the right rituals; they’ve worshiped regularly. Yet, still their lives are in ruins. “Why is God silent?” they ask.

Maybe you have asked that question too. Maybe you have prayed and read your Bible. Maybe you’ve come to church every Sunday. And yet after it all, God feels absent. You join the Israelites in their cry, “God, are you even listening?”

Isaiah’s response is not comforting. If this were an exam in pastoral care, Isaiah would fail. What he offers is a hard truth: God has been listening; God just hasn’t yet heard anything worth responding to.

Yes, the Israelites have been worshiping God, but their worship hasn't affected the other parts of their lives. It hasn't changed how they treat people. Even while they observe the Sabbath, they force their workers to continue working, depriving them of rest and a fair, living wage. Even while they pray for their own salvation, they turn away the refugee and immigrant, the orphan and widow, the poor and hungry.

Carol Dempsey explains that, in the Torah, "hiding yourself from your kin" means pretending that some people do not exist or expecting others to take care of them.

While the Israelites have busied themselves with the outward trappings of piety, they have ignored the intention of the Law—which was, not to empower individuals to come closer to God, but to empower a community to come closer together, in the presence of God. "You want me?" God says. "Easy, look around."

Isaiah is talking about worship divorced from ethical practice—faith that shows up once every Sunday morning but not the rest of the week.

It's why young people—my generation—stopped coming to church. It wasn't just the allure of other pleasures, or a busy schedule, or the discomfort of pews, or dispassionate music, or boring sermons—though those things didn't help. It was because, at some point, they, like Isaiah, woke up to the hard fact that our lives didn't match our worship.

But there is good news, Isaiah says. God's not absent. God's just elsewhere. God's next door, in the person of your neighbor. If you want God, go to them. If you want justice, restore justice for those around you. If you want to be filled, share your bread. If you want a home, invite another into it. If you want God to hear your cries, start paying attention to the cries around you.

God's not denying the suffering of the Israelites. God's asking them to use that suffering as a window into other people's pain. If they want God's help, they've got to start lending a helping hand to those around them. They've got to come together as a community, as kin.

There's a Chinese saying that goes: "If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody" (Jenny Santi, "The Secret to Happiness," *TIME*).

Research is showing that helping others makes us healthier and happier, even activating the same pleasure parts of the brain stimulated by food and intimacy (Santi).

Dr. Christine Carter is a sociologist at UC Berkeley, and she says, "People 55 and older who volunteer for two or more organizations have an impressive 44 percent lower likelihood of dying—and that's after sifting out every other contributing factor... This is a stronger effect than exercising four times a week or going to church."

Now, I'm not saying you should stop going to church. And Isaiah isn't telling the Israelites to stop fasting. The Bible encourages fasting as a reverent practice. Rather, what Isaiah is saying,

what I'm saying, is think bigger. Make a fast, not only of food, but of privilege. Worship God, not only on Sunday morning, but in every encounter, every time you're buying groceries or walking down the street. Let love and justice be your worship.

Ask yourself what are you going to do each day to practice this fast. Isaiah talks about oppression and big, systemic issues, but he also says your response needs to be concrete and daily. It concerns *your* bread, *your* house, *your* self.

Today, these scouts and their leaders are here to remind us of what it means to serve.

Sure, scouting is about fun and camping and learning new skills. It's about meetings and merit badges and rank. But at its heart, it is fundamentally about helping others. It's about stepping up and doing something when your neighbor is hurting.

[At this time, I want to invite you to stand up if you are or were once a scout. Stand up if you're a scout leader. Stand up if you're the parent or relative of a scout. Stand up if you have been helped by a scout. Stand up if you know a scout... *This* is the kind of fast God wants, a community standing up together, for each other.]

In 1909, an American newspaper publisher by the name of William D. Boyce visited London. Legend has it that a dense fog descended upon the streets of London, and Boyce got lost. An unknown Scout took him by the hand and guided him to where he was going. Moved by this unexpected act of kindness, Boyce reached into his pocket and offered the Scout some money as a reward. The Scout refused, saying he would not accept a tip for doing a Good Turn. It was this encounter that led Boyce to found the Boy Scouts of America.

Just as that unknown Scout found Boyce in the fog, so God will find you. God *is* listening. God knows your pain. And God has given you an answer—a way out of the fog that life can become. Take a hand. Link arms with a neighbor. Dispel the mist by the sheer force of people walking together in solidarity. God listens to you when you listen to your neighbor. **Amen.**