

The Public Square as Sacred Space *A Sermon on Isaiah 59:1-4, 9-16, 21*

By the Rev. Shannon Daley-Harris

Rev. Daley-Harris preached the following sermon at Maryville College Chapel, tracing the progress in Isaiah 59 from complaint to confession to calling. The public square—flyered with eviction notices and photos of children gunned down—is, she argues, precisely the kind of place the church belongs. In fact, it is the kind of place where we might encounter God—a sacred space.

Complaint

The pollsters in Third Isaiah's day reported that God's favorability rating was way down; a majority of the populace rated God's job performance as "not good." Frankly, they were feeling let down, snookered. They had endured Babylonian exile, they had returned to Judah with great hope... And what did they get? What did they find in what was supposed to be this wonderful new chapter? More economic woes. Continued oppression that hit the children, the poor, and the stranger the hardest. Violence, more war, bloodshed. A judicial system that still got it wrong much of the time, where the vulnerable could not secure justice. People who rushed to spread lies and sow discord. Sound familiar?

Economic woes, with children, the poor, and the stranger bearing the brunt: today, one out of every five children is living in poverty. The younger they are the more likely they are to be poor. One in twelve children lives in extreme poverty, in which a family of four struggles to survive on less than \$11,000 a year. A child is killed by guns every 3 hours, and a child is abused or neglected every 41 seconds. The public discourse has turned more bitter and rancorous than ever before, and the fact-checking site "Snopes" can't keep up with the proliferation of misinformation and lies. Yep, our day doesn't seem so different than Isaiah's.

In dismay the people in Third Isaiah's day turned the full force of their complaints to God: what's the matter, God? Can't you save us? Can't you even hear us? What's wrong with you?

In fact complaint, or lament, is important. Complaint is a recognition and declaration that all is not right, that the way things are, the status quo, is wrong, that something needs to change. And when we look at the public square, at our common life, and the way we order life together, and when it is *not* right or just, complaint is a place to start. But it is not where we are supposed to stop.

Confession of Sin

In a familiar cartoon, one person is talking to another, and the first person says, "Sometimes I would like to ask God why God allows poverty, suffering, and injustice when God could do something about it." Her friend responds, "Well, why don't you ask God?" And the first speaker replies, "Because I'm afraid God would ask me the same question."

In our passage today, Third Isaiah responds to the implied complaint of the people by saying, "See the *Lord's* hand is not too short to save, nor *God's* ear too dull to hear. Rather, *your*

iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and *your* sins have hidden God's face from you so that God does not hear." It is not *God's* shortcomings but *our own* that have us in this predicament. **And so the people are led from complaint to confession.**

In fact, the prophet begins to use "we" language—standing *with* the people in their confession of shortcoming: "Our transgressions indeed are with us and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the Lord, and turning away from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart."

The *conditions* haven't changed—economic anxiety, oppression, violence, lies, injustice. But instead of blaming God or pointing the finger at others, they are confessing their own *communal responsibility for society's injustice*.

Marian Wright Edelman, the founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, after sharing the troubling statistics on the state of children in America, like the high rate of child poverty in our rich nation, often notes, "These facts aren't acts of God; they are our choices."

Dr. Fred Craddock, Biblical scholar and retired professor of preaching, was speaking at the Children's Defense Fund's Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry several years ago, and shared this experience. He said, "I was in a bad mood one night when I was saying my prayers. I said to God 'I think you have too many children, God.' God said "What did you say, Fred?" Craddock responded, 'I just think you have too many children. I read the report. Millions go to bed hungry every night... And what is it, a child in the U.S.A. shot dead every [3 hours]? If you can't feed and clothe and keep safe the children you have, well, then you just have too many.'

"God didn't say anything right away," Dr. Craddock told us, "But then God said, 'Well, you came from a pretty big family Fred. How did you all do it?'... 'Well,' I said, 'there was never any question. The older took care of the younger. Those who were able took care of those who weren't able.' God said, 'That's right. You got it. That's the plan.'"

Affirmation of God's Saving Grace and Power

Confessing our communal responsibility for the absence of justice and truth in the public square, however, doesn't mean any one of us can single-handedly turn everything around. Our passage from Isaiah goes on to suggest that God saw the sorry state of the public square, the failures of their common life, and "it displeased God that there was no justice. God saw that there was no one and was appalled that there was no one to intervene, so God's own arm" brought about the victory of restoring justice. We are reminded that **we are dependent, ultimately, on God's saving action, and not one of us, by dint of our own efforts alone, can restore justice apart from God's grace and power.**

And so we have to strike a vital balance: affirming our reliance on God's grace and power... while not using that affirmation as an excuse to sit on our hands and wait for God to set our society, our nation, and world aright. When we accept that we cannot USE God, then we become open to ways that God will use us.

Prophetic Commission

The final verse of chapter 59 reads, “And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children’s children, says the Lord, from now on and forever more” (v. 21). This, then, is our charge. If we recognize that justice is turned back and complain that truth is stumbling in the public square; if we confess our complicity in the injustice; if we affirm our reliance on God’s grace and power; then **we are finally to embrace the covenant commitment and accept the prophetic commission from God to speak God’s word of justice, to speak God’s word that would be good news to the oppressed, liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.**

The Bible is rife with examples of prophets who were not thrilled with the prophetic commission laid upon them. They claimed to be too young to speak God’s prophetic word. They claimed to be lousy public speakers. They weren’t thrilled at the criticism directed at them for speaking God’s prophetic word. It was often a lonely and daunting task to be a prophet.

Have you ever felt that way? Too young, too inarticulate, too sensitive or alone or overwhelmed to speak out for justice? But our text promises: God’s spirit is upon us and God’s words will be in our mouths and our children’s mouths.

This movement from complaint all the way to embracing the prophetic commission was experienced by Shane Claiborne and described in his book called *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. Shane grew up not too far from here, in Eastern Tennessee, he describes his younger self as a pretty typical evangelical who felt some emptiness that wasn’t filled no matter how many Christian wristbands or records he bought. He wound up at Eastern College in Pennsylvania.

Well, one day he was in the cafeteria with friends, complaining about the food, when a friend showed him the day’s newspaper with an article about a group of forty homeless families who were being evicted from an abandoned cathedral in North Philadelphia. The families were with an organization called Kensington Welfare Rights Union, made up mostly of homeless mothers and children who took care of one another. They’d been living in a tent city a few blocks from the cathedral, but conditions were worsening with rats and flooding, and the cathedral had been vacant for several years. The archdiocese announced they had 48 hours to get out or face arrest. Shane later wrote,

We scarfed down the rest of our dinner with our heads spinning, wondering what we should do. This complicated the old ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ thing, which had become so manageable. Now homelessness was not just adults on the downtown streets but women and children. It wasn’t long before we were packed in a car heading into “the Badlands,” as the neighborhood was known, to look for the Cathedral... Little did we know that God’s got a thing for showing up in badlands like Kensington and Nazareth...

The cathedral was easy to spot: the families had hung a banner out front that read ‘How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?’ It took us a minute to realize they were talking about our Savior as a homeless man. Timidly, we

walked up to the large red doors and gave them a knock. We could hear the thumping echo through the marble cavern. Several folks clumsily opened the doors and they embraced us without hesitation. Then they invited us in. And we would never be the same again. They gave us a grand tour of the shantytown they had constructed inside, and introduced us to a few of the children, who promptly stole our caps and jumped on our backs. They poured out their hearts to us, their struggles and their dreams. They reminded us that we all need each other and assured us that, if we all shared with one another, there would be enough for everyone. When we asked what we could do, they didn't seem as interested in our stuff as they were in us. They wanted us to join them in the cathedral and to bring our friends, and they alerted us to the urgency of the looming eviction. With the laughter of the children ringing in our ears, and the weight of the families' struggle heavy on our hearts, we went back to our college, disturbed, aching, and aware of the ticking of the clock...

The students ran around campus, putting up flyers that said, "Jesus is getting kicked out of church in North Philly, come hear about it." To their surprise, over a hundred people showed up for the meeting and dozens came to the cathedral the following day, generating media attention and building momentum as city leaders, religious leaders, and advocates turned out to support the families sheltering in the cathedral. Near the end of the 48 hours deadline, they rang a bell to let people in the neighborhood know that the eviction was nearing. With just an hour remaining before the city officials were expected to arrive, the students, other supporters, and families shared a "last supper"

Shane recalled, "The families asked for a show of hands of who would remain in the building, risking arrest, when the officials returned. As I raised my hand, a young girl named Destiny was sitting on my lap, and she asked why I was raising my hand. 'Do you want to be able to stay here?' I asked. Destiny said, 'Yes, this is my home.' And I told her, 'That's why I'm raising my hand.' She hugged me and slowly lifted her hand in the air."

Well, when the officials came to evict the families, they saw the crowd and crawled back into the car. Days and weeks passed, the students got an air horn and cell phones to mobilize the campus when there was a renewed threat of eviction, and they would go back to the cathedral to face down the officials. So the end of that story, finally, is that the families held a press conference... many received housing and some people donated homes; city agencies were persuaded to provide housing; and friends pulled together to make sure everyone was taken care of. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union announced this had been a project of survival and wasn't intended to be permanent, and was grateful for the power of the people. They marched to the Mayor's office and left a pile of shoes with the invitation to "walk in their shoes" and see the world through their eyes.

Shane, who wrote "It was in St. Ed's that I was born again... again," later founded an intentional Christian community in Philadelphia, has served alongside mother Teresa in India and in hospitals in Iraq, and there is much more to his journey and the countless people he has met and struggled for justice alongside.

But Shane looks back to that first day where the most pressing thing was complaining about the cafeteria food, and—with a child named Destiny, the families of St. Ed's, and by God's grace—he moved to embrace the prophetic commission to work for justice and righteousness.

Sacred Space

Each of us is invited to move from complaint to confession, to affirmation of faith, and finally to embracing the prophetic commission to speak truth to power and work for justice in the public square, in our common life. I wonder, with God's spirit upon you and God's words in your mouth, what will you proclaim? How will you work to bring truth and righteousness and justice to the public square? Because the public square is indeed sacred space.

Here, this chapel, is surely sacred space: a place where we seek a vision of the world God intends; where we confess our sin when we individually and collectively fall short of what God intends, where we are assured of God's pardon; this chapel is a place where we affirm our faith in God's saving grace and power; a place where we respond in faith and leave with both charge and blessing.

So too, my friends, is the public square a sacred space—the public square is a sacred space in which we seek a vision of the world God intends and protest when it doesn't reflect God's justice; a place where we are called to confess our sin as a society, to affirm our faith in God's saving grace and power; and it is a place to respond in faith and accept the charge and blessing of God's commission to prophetic action. May it be so for each of you; for all of us. Amen.