

Newsletter Reflections for August

The Hebrew Scripture readings for the month of July and much of August contain selections from the 8th century prophets about the message God was wanting delivered to those people God claimed who had crossed the Jordan and entered the land promised so long ago to Abraham. Just as they entered the land, they had made certain promises to God who had led them, protected them, and provided for them for forty years while trying to teach them how to be a people who were going to establish a community living according to certain precepts; the precepts of God's reign. Those precepts were contained in commandments given at Mount Sinai which we call the Ten Commandments and in over a hundred other instruction designed to allow all in the community to live together in peace and abundance. Within the Torah, which we often call the Law but which actually means the teachings, provision was made for the treatment of workers, widows, orphans, aliens...all those who could be marginalized by those with wealth and power. During the time in which Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah and the prophet for which the book of Isaiah is named (Isaiah of Jerusalem) lived, the nation states of both Israel and Judah were prosperous...at least for the elite. For those in the kings' circles in both countries, life was good. Times were prosperous and they lived well. However, the ones God called upon to deliver a message were aware that things were not really all that good for many folks. In the books which record the history of these two countries (1st and 2nd Kings as well as 1st and 2nd Chronicles) there are signs that even some of the Levites, the priests for the people, knew as the saying goes "something was wrong in Denmark". In fact, things were rotten at the core. The authors of these histories begin the descriptions of each new king's reign with this phrase: Judah (Israel) did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, often adding each new king's way was worse than the one before. There are a couple kings who returned to the Lord's ways, but few. The 8th century prophets are given the charge to proclaim to the people that God is not pleased with them; the society they have built is not constructed on the foundational rules God gave them. The criticisms fall into two categories: failure to worship God and not following God's ways by their lack of caring for others and mistreatment of the vulnerable within their society. In many ways these are actually the same problem for if you are truly following God's teachings about community, the vulnerable will be protected. Looking at archeological data from the time period covered by the histories and the 8th century prophets it can be seen there were two world co-existing: the world of the powerful and affluent and the world of the marginalized. A few great homes were built and occupied by the wealthy while many suffered from poverty and oppression by the wealthy and powerful. These descriptions of life in the 8th century are not unique to that historical time slot. In many ways our current society and the structures upon which it is based resemble the criticisms raised by those 8th century prophets. In contemporary nomenclature we often look upon prophets as those who tell the future while Biblically speaking that was not the role of the prophet. The prophet was the one God chose to carry a message about how God viewed the behavior and actions happening and God's judgment about their behavior. Since often, the prophet's message was not welcomed and no change in behavior occurred, the judgments described befell their

society. They lost their homeland and all those possessions as it was the affluent and the powerful who were taken away. The poor remained in the land. If we look at the statistics about where our own behaviors and policies have led, there is a similarity to those. Our culture now has the 1% who are doing well and the 99% who are struggling. Our culture's disregard for those who have less shows up in many ways; the availability of educational opportunities, the availability of good and affordable medical care, the availability of housing for many, the existence of food deserts...and other ways. This led to the great difference in the effect the pandemic had on certain communities. For many who are not in the 1%, as long as they can continue with their current lifestyle, they are content to let the things which have led to these discrepancies continue. However, there are prophets among us who are drawing our attention to how wrong this state of things is. Reading the 8th century prophets should remind us of God's thoughts on "the way things are" versus "the way things should be". Reading the gospels of our Lord should remind us of the teachings he left for us to follow. Our failures to work toward bringing God's reign to earth show up in the lives of those who are marginalized among us. Our efforts in benevolences are good, but working toward reducing the need for these things would be better.

Shalom,

Pastor Libby

About changing the designation of the Hunger offering

Long before I came to Olney, the offering called 5-Cents-A-Meal was changed in Charlotte Presbytery where my "home" church was located. The first hunger offering was collecting pennies at each meal; Rocky River changed the name to 10-cents-a-Meal in the late 1990's due to the rising costs of food. The Presbytery of Western North Carolina has just made a similar move for the same reasons. The new official designation of the offering will be "Daily Change." The motto accompanying this new designation is: "give the change you want to see in the world." This change was announced along with the publication of grants which the hunger committee made with these funds. The purpose of the donations has not changed. We will continue to use the envelopes with the "5-cents" label until those are gone, but feel free to increase your offerings as the need is great.