

March 21, 2010, 5L, Isaiah 58:1-12

1 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!  
Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

3 “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs 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 them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

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

9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say,  
Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

11 The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

12 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 live in.

This part of Isaiah is found in the part of the prophets' book that is usually referred to as *Third Isaiah* because most of the contents of the final eleven chapters of the book deal with events that happened during the restoration, that is after the Jews had been released from exile in Babylon and were free to return to Palestine. Many, but by no means did all of the Jews return from Babylon. Those that did were in for a rude surprise when they reached Jerusalem. It looked pretty much like it did when their parents and grandparents had been forced to go into exile in and around Babylon.

Sounds like there was a lot of conflict going on, factions had been formed, people chose sides. And while our own country sounds pretty divided these days, I believe that it was far worse for those who lived in Jerusalem during the days of this prophet called Third Isaiah.

So obviously the sermon will be about conflict: the good, the bad, and the ugly sides of it right? Well, no, not really; it's really going to be about the other side of conflict, the challenges of community; but then again, when I start writing these things, I have no idea where it will end up. But you know that, right? Anyway, here goes. . .

Recently I put the shoe on the other foot, so to speak. I imagined that I am not the pastor of this church, but a member of it. I tried to imagine what it would be like if you were my fellow church members. I imagined that I sat on one of the boards of this church either as an elder or a deacon. I thought about those of you currently serving in those roles and how we work together in a stressful time, in that ministry. I didn't think about ministry that I might be doing outside of the church. I imagined that my pastor was a bearded, tallish, slightly(!) overweight gray haired man in his early sixties, and that he preferred being called Don by his friends which was a good thing because he didn't think he had any enemies.

And then I imagined it was 7:30 on a Sunday morning. Patti was in Indianapolis visiting the grandchildren and their parents. I was home, in bed, thinking about the day. I wondered if going to church was an automatic or a critical decision. In other words, was I going to go to church out of habit or obligation, or was there another reason.

Best case scenario? I got up, put on my bathrobe walked downstairs to get the paper, poured myself a huge bowl of Cheerios, ate, showered, got dressed, and arrived at 1400 Highland in time for Sunday School.

Best case scenario? I had not come to church out of habit or obligation. There was another reason, actually there were several reasons. One of the reasons was that I came to be with you. Since joining this church back in '96, (Faye and I joined on the same day.) through a myriad of activities and events I had come to know you, and have grown fond of you, and when I am with you, I simply feel at home. It is a comfortable feeling. It doesn't mean we always agree. It doesn't mean we don't get mad at each other from time to time, but in the final analysis, we follow Rodney King's advice: we do get along with each other. We tolerate each other's individuality. We have learned to forgive each other. I enjoy being a member of this church.

Another reason I come to this church is to worship with you. Remember I said it was felt like being at home. People have told me that they can worship anywhere either by themselves or with any group of people. I agree, but there is something about the quality of worship when and where a person can sit among friends and long time acquaintances. It is unique and like no other experience. We sing together; good voices and bad (I suspect they are all beautiful to God), we share happy news and sad, we pray together.

We give from our most precious resources: our valuable time, our unique combination of abilities, our hard earned money. The more we do these things, the closer we become, the more we learn to depend on each other, and together share the witness of our belief in God, not in so many words, though such words are always welcome, but in working together in common cause, in the name of Jesus Christ.

My very favorite TV program is NCIS, a crime drama in a military setting. Jethro Gibbs is the head of a four person team of Navy detectives. At some point in nearly every drama, when the call comes in reporting a crime was committed, and Gibbs normally says, "Let's go!"

Gibbs' second in command is a younger man named Tony DiNozzo. When Gibbs says, "Let's go!" Tony normally responds, "Got your six, boss!" Now that is an expression used by aviators and especially military aviators to identify other usually enemy aircraft. This is how it works. Pretend you are a pilot (OK Bart, you don't have to pretend!). Your aircraft is in the middle of a clock face. Twelve o'clock is to your front, three o'clock is to your right, nine o'clock to your left, and six o'clock is directly to your rear. Pilots depend on each other to let them know where they are in relation to aircraft they can't see. And unless they have eyes in the back of their heads, no way will they be able to see someone behind them. The dark side of all this is that in aerial combat, if an enemy aircraft is on your six it's what you might call a "worse case scenario".

So when someone says, "I've got your six!" it means that you don't have to worry about that unpleasant surprise. That is what DiNozzo is telling Gibbs as they head for the scene of the crime.

This was played out nicely not too long ago when David broke his leg. We had his six. People were more than willing to cook for him, to go to the store for him, to take him to doctor's appointments, and that is the fruit of a caring community of people that the church aspires to be. But you know me, I'm not willing to let well enough alone. I wondered how far are we willing to go to help a member of our church community?

OK, nothing up my sleeve here. I'm not talking about anybody in particular. I was just wondering what the limit of our generosity is. How far are we willing to go for each other? Now the reason I ask this question is not because I'm about to ask for a special offering. Here's the reason.

Jesus calls us. That's the reason. Jesus calls us to go and to do particular things. Some of them can be risky. Remember that he told one person, "Sell all that you own and

distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Another time, watching people putting money into the temple treasury, he saw a woman put in her last two coins and he said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

So I was thinking that if any one of us were willing to follow that teaching or that example, would we have that person’s six? In other words it’s important that everybody in this room understand that no matter what terrible surprises life might deal us, we are part of this community and the community has our six. All of us have it for you! All of you have it for me.

You will never have to go without food, water, lodging, clothing, sanitation, medical care, or companionship because as a part of this congregation, we have your six. Now what are the chances of any of that happening to you? Pretty remote is my guess, but it is not outside the realm of possibility that we could become a sort of instant Job. Wouldn’t it be great to know that no matter how great the catastrophe that as a member of this community you will never have to worry about living on the street because we are here for each other; because we trust each other.

And because God in Christ Jesus has all of our sixes and the extent to which we trust in that is I believe directly proportional to the extent we trust that this congregation has your six and mine.

Now this has all been a product of some theological musings a good bit of which grew out of conversations we’ve had over the last few months in the Bible study. I offer it to God and to you as something to give serious thought to and about; to formulate in your minds possible settings and scenarios where all of this might be called into play.

And how all this might be some sort of model or example of how God protects us. It is also, fellow aviators (who have each other’s six) a solid foundation from which we can lift off in faith, take incredible risks, because we know that in taking care of and for each other, we might fail, we might look stupid, we might even be accused of being “fools for Christ’s sake,” but by taking care of each other’s needs and trusting that not only God but the rest of us have your six, perhaps we can risk boldly in the name of Jesus Christ.