

2025 Proper 16C

Many of you know that I majored in Russian and German in college. I remember a friend of mine suddenly realizing that I wasn't just learning how to read and speak these languages. I was learning to see the world from a different point of view. Through a lens shaped by culture, geography, history.

When you study those two particular languages, you learn a lot about World War 2, and the years leading up to it. It was a lot to take in for a 20 year old.

But my study of German began in middle school. I was just 13 years old when I saw two videos that stay with me even today. They had a deep impact in my understanding of what humans are capable of—both the good and the bad.

The first was a video taken during the liberation of the concentration camps. Black and white images of piles of dead bodies outside the ovens juxtaposed with the piles of gold, silver, clothing that was taken from them drove home the horrific truth that things had been deemed more valuable than people.

Images of the faces of those who survived—huge eyes in bodies that were skin stretched over bones—are far more horrifying than any zombie I ever saw in *The Walking Dead*.

It was a lot to take in; I wonder if it would be allowed today. I know now that the teacher gave her colleagues a heads-up, so that when we arrived in whatever class we had after German, they would understand why we were looking so horrified and sick.

I saw those images, and all my ideas about the fundamental goodness of people were blown apart.

How could this happen? How could anyone treat another human being as something less-than? Were the Germans really so heartless, so cruel? Whenever I am in one of those cynical, “Human Beings Suck” moods, these images are floating in the back of my mind.

I suspect that if you’ve ever seen that footage, it is replaying in your head right now, too. Sorry for that.

But if you haven’t seen it, maybe you need to. Maybe we all need to, right now. We all need to be honest about what human beings are capable of. Not just the ones who actively harm others; but those who turn a blind eye to the ugliness because they are benefiting from it.

That is the context of this passage from Isaiah this morning. No, not Nazi death camps—but the willful ignorance of people with privilege, power and wealth. They made a show of their religiosity. They thought their public performative piety would be enough to please God, who would then protect them from any danger.

And they were put out when God didn't reward them for their 'good behavior.'

They complained, "Can't you SEE us fasting, God? Can't you see how hard we're trying to gain your attention? To earn your favor? Why have you turned a blind eye to us?"

To which God, through the prophet, replied, "Oh, I see you."

I see you pointing fingers at everyone else rather than own up to your own failings.

I see you blaming Me for what is really just the consequences of your wickedness.

I see you making a show of fasting and praying—all the while keeping yourself separate from the people you consider beneath you. I would rather you sat down at a

meal with them. Shared your bread with them. Listened to them as equals. Be in community with them.

I see you trampling the Sabbath, failing to honor this day I have given you to remind you of the freedom I gave you when I brought you out of slavery in Egypt. You drum your fingers, waiting for it to be over so you can go back to your self-serving, dishonest business practices that oppress and enslave the very people I want you to sit down with.

I see you, says God. ***And I don't like what I see.***

...

But I told you there were two videos that stay with me.

It is that second video that runs through my head whenever I hear this verse:

*You shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.*

The second video shows women going out and picking through the rubble of a bombed-out city (I think it was Dresden). They weren't just sitting around moaning about the Good Old Days. They went out every day and sorted through what was left, even if it was through their tears. They didn't let despair paralyze them.

They went through their devastated streets, separating out anything that was usable for rebuilding—stones, metal, what-have-you—and setting it aside for the men with wheelbarrows who came along behind them. They would carry whatever was usable to those who could use it to rebuild. To repair. To restore.

To make whole.

I remind myself of that video when I see film footage of Gaza or Ukraine, and see only the ugliness of humanity's destructive power. Even sometimes when I see cities in our own country where hurricane or tornado, fire or flood has reduced them to rubble.

The devastation doesn't get the last word.

There is healing—for bodies, for people, for cities. Even for the world. Being made whole—restoring *shalom*.

But we have to do our part. Sometimes we have to set aside our pre-conceived notions of how and when and through whom God acts. We have to remember that we worship a God who is fundamentally CREATIVE, (not destructive!) who is always looking for ways to make God's justice and love and peace known in this world that works so hard to resist it.

The light of Christ can be seen through even the tiniest crack. The love of Christ takes root underground and pokes its way to the surface wherever it can.

That's where this Gospel story comes in.

Jesus is in the synagogue teaching, and he sees a woman who had suffered for 18 years. We usually read it as a physical ailment, something that has affected her back, making her unable to stand up straight. Imagine 18 years of not being able to see anything but the ground. To never look at anything more than people's feet. If you have any sort of chronic back pain, you can imagine what she must have been dealing with.

But for a minute I want you to imagine it as something else. Something spiritually or emotionally or psychologically that has weighed her down all these years. Something that kept her eyes on the ground because of shame or embarrassment instead of infirmity.

Whatever it was, this ailment had separated her from the community for nearly two decades. And they had all gone along with it.

How many times had she slipped in, unnoticed? Was she used to being overlooked?

There were probably people who were kind, brought her food, helped her in whatever ways they could. But they all accepted the status quo. They could not imagine any way for her to be released from this woman. This poor creature.

No doubt there were plenty of others who quietly judged her, seeing her infirmity as the consequence of her own sin. They didn't help because, in their minds, she didn't *deserve* help.

Then along comes Jesus.

Jesus *sees* her. Jesus calls her to him. Jesus doesn't even bother asking if she wants to be healed, he just lays his hands on her and sets her free.

And the authorities get their knickers in a twist because he did this on the Sabbath. Surely he could have waited *one* more day...

Here's an interesting fact. Auschwitz was liberated on January 27, 1945. Anyone want to guess what day of the week that was?

Yep. A Saturday. Would anyone have complained, suggested they wait and come back the next day, so that the Sabbath could be honored? *I don't think so.*

Mercy doesn't pay attention to the calendar.

Jesus isn't rejecting the importance of the Sabbath. He is just reminding them what its actual purpose is. To remind them that, as children of God, they are free. He's reminding them that Sabbath is meant to be a celebration of the wholeness, completeness of God's creation.

And *every* human being in it.

That moment in the synagogue on that long Sabbath day was not just about setting that woman free from her burden. It was an invitation to everyone there to be set free from the things that weigh us down, the things that keep our eyes on the ground, afraid to look up.

To use the imagery from the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus was inviting us to look up, to look to God, and discover that the Divine One is not a consuming fire waiting to punish us. The Divine One, in the face of Jesus, who sees us and calls us to him, who makes us whole, who lifts up our heads so that we can see the beauty beyond the ugliness, the life beyond the death. Who invites us to be participants in the shalom-making activity of God in this world, sorting through the rubble to find that kingdom which cannot be shaken.

The devastation doesn't get the last word. Amen.