



FOOD FOR
THE JOURNEY

WALKING alongside

strengthening congregational community ministries

» Congregational Advocacy «

» DEVOTIONAL

Scripture

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. 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? 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?

— Isaiah 58:1, 6-7 (NRSV)

Story

It was my junior year of high school. We were on our big class trip to Washington, DC, to tour museums and visit important places in the history of our country. One of the sites we saw along the way was the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It was a cold morning, and we had to wait for hours outside before we were finally able to enter. The cold air was nothing, though, compared to the chills I experienced as I caught glimpses of the true horror that was the Holocaust. There are so many images and words that are imprinted on my heart and mind from that day. One of those images is of a wall with a quote engraved on it. They were the words of Pastor Martin Niemoller, and they read:

*“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a socialist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.”

While I did not yet have the label “advocacy” to put on this type of action, this is when I first began to realize the importance of speaking up for others. Reading his words helped me to see that sometimes another person or another group of people need someone to stand up and fight for them. It is easy for me to excuse myself from involvement by saying things like “it is none of my business” or “I should let them speak for themselves.” But the truth is that it often takes someone outside of the situation to raise awareness on behalf of those who are suffering or hurting because their voices are not being heard or they are being ignored.

Commentary

Throughout the Old Testament, the concepts of justice and righteousness are inextricably linked. God makes it clear that our acts of worship are meaningless if our acts in every day life are not ethical and loving. The message of the prophets in particular is a call to return to right worship and right living. This passage from Isaiah is no exception to this theme. God is again calling his people back to a just way of life so that their worship may once again be pure and acceptable.

In the first verse we see God calling his people to speak up to bring justice. In fact, God does not just say speak up, He tells them to shout and not hold back. The calling out of injustice and wrong doing is not one that can be made silently. Just as a trumpet is sounded to rally the troops, the call should go out loud and strong to the purveyors of

MORE ON BACK

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wrongdoing. Their sin must be announced and a return to righteousness made.

The people have been worshipping God and participating in fasts. Imagine their confusion when God calls them rebellious when they are engaging in a fast, an act of worship that most would consider to be reserved for more disciplined followers. They are not fasting, however, because God has called them to but because they are hoping to get something from God. They are fasting for themselves and not for God. They are attempting to serve themselves by their works instead of serving God and others.

Who is God asking them to serve and how? The kind of worship that is acceptable to God is service to the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless, the poor, the naked, and family in need. They are to deny themselves, to fast from their own pleasure. They are to share their own food with those who are without. They are to invite those without a home into their own homes. They are to offer their own clothes to those who have need. They are to offer freedom to those they have put into bondage. They must change their own ways and call others to the same repentance and right living.

The people are to be about these kinds of works – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and setting the oppressed free. They can do some of these things on their own. They can offer what they have to those who are in need, and they can examine their own way of life to see how they may be keeping others in bondage. Much like there are systemic problems in our world today that serve to oppress people, many of the people of Israel were still being oppressed by the Persian government. They were victims of heavy taxes, enslavement, and unfair economic policies. In calling His people to “let the oppressed go free,” God is calling them to correct the structural problems that are keeping people in bondage. God is serving as their advocate and calling them to advocate on behalf of their brothers and sisters in need of their help.

Prayer

Help us to speak and act with wisdom –
 To be a voice for those whose voice is not heard
 To stand up for those who are oppressed
 To defend the rights of the poor and the hurting.
 Help us to be open handed rather than tight-fisted and
 To embrace those around us with the same love with which you welcome us.
 (Adapted from Proverbs 31:8-9, 20)

Question for reflection

- Who in your community needs you to advocate for them?

References

The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 6, The Book of Isaiah 40-66, Christopher R. Seitz, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.
NIV Application Commentary, Isaiah, John N. Oswalt, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003
Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 25, Isaiah 34-66, John D. Watts, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005

Stepping Stones

Brief descriptions of how to implement specific ministries. For each of the five broader areas above, many ministries can be envisioned. We have identified a few of these for each area and have articulated the steps for how that ministry might be planned.

Pathways

Learn from the first-hand account of those already engaged in this specific ministry. Plus, develop networking contacts as go-to sources to explore solutions to challenges or celebrations of successes.

Food for the Journey

A short devotional based on scripture that can be used in church bulletins, as a Moment for Mission during worship or as an introduction to a Bible study.