

*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.*

*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees,  
you will never enter the dominion of Heaven.*

*I came to you in fear and much trembling.*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our strength.

Amen.

Good morning, children of God, good morning! I am grateful to see you, you who are gathered here in this holy space this morning, and to be seen by you, you who join us in this virtual holy space today and across the days ahead. The Psalmist says, "I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of God!" And I am glad to enter that house—this house—with all of you who are here, God's holy community in this place and in this time.

And yet, and yet...I must tell you that getting here today has not been easy for me. For two weeks, perhaps more, I have been poring over the readings for today, knowing that I would be preaching into the closest thing the Episcopal Church has to the town and congregational meetings favored by our New England siblings. And the more I pored, the more concerned I became—*anxious* even.

Why *anxious*, you might ask? Surely you are aged, and wizened, wise in the ways of church, baptized over and over again in its wonders and its wiles. Surely there is no cause here for anxiety. And even if there were some cause, was it not drilled into your priestly skull during Interim School that the main job of the Transitional Minister, surrounding all the other jobs that you talked about two weeks ago, is to be an "non-anxious presence"?

And yes, that's true. And it's also true that old and wizened as I am, I remain very human. It is with humanity that I come into this community of God and of you. And also, because I am a little set in my ways, I like to preach the lectionary rather than shape the lectionary to any particular occasion. That's because I always find the powerful Voice of the living God in these readings we share each week with millions of

our siblings around the world. That Voice always has a word to say to each and every particular community into which it arrives on the back of the lectionary.

It seems to me—and here is the cause for my anxiety—it seems to me that today the Voice of the Living God is speaking to us about righteousness, righteousness searched out from the depths of God, as Paul, waxing almost philosophical about human wisdom and the wisdom of God, says to the Corinthians today.

And you know what? Whenever I hear the word righteousness, I get immediately anxious. Maybe it's because that word is so often associated, at least in my experience, with narrow and proscriptive orthodoxies, with the constraints of law, with the jots and the tittles. I mean, listen to Jesus today: "I come not to abolish the law...but to fulfill it...For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the dominion of heaven." Well, I think, that's it for me! I'm done.

And Isaiah is at it again today too. Listen to this opener:

"Shout out, do not hold back!...Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins!"

And on he goes, calling out and enumerating those sins, one scathing line after another. If you're like me, if this community is in any way like our spiritual ancestor, the house of Jacob, it's enough to put the fear of the living God in you. When I read and study those lines, and the words of Jesus too, I find myself, willy-nilly, convicted.

And conviction like that is a slippery slope. In our time, conviction like that has become the proof-text for all manner of terrible attacks on half the human race or more. I know that is not what the prophet Isaiah or Jesus, child of God, intended. I know how easily righteousness can shade into individual and communal self-righteousness that ends in bonfires of forbidden books lighting up the public square and the banishing of the name of my particular tribe from the school rooms and school yards of America. So, yes, talk of righteousness always raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

And then there is this: that summons to righteousness can, in a sermon, very quickly turn into what my estimable Warden calls chiding and scolding. And for any number of reasons I mostly do not want, in my preaching, to chide or to scold. First of all, it's not generally productive in getting us as God's gathered community where we need to be.

Second, in my wizened experience, it generally creates guilt, and I have real doubts whether guilt is the best motivator of God's Love or of good behavior in general.

So all that, as I began yesterday to try to get myself to my laptop to tap out a sermon, ended up sending me off on a million and one other necessary, long-delayed chores—each one a long overdue and righteous endeavor, no doubt!

I took down our long unadorned and dried out, though immensely fragrant, Christmas tree, and carried it out our front door. That led to my sweeping up the immensity of Frazer fir needles that then adorned our living room floor and our porch. That led to my vacuuming up the whole living room and that led to dusting corners long hidden from a dust cloth or mop, and on and on I went, one chore leading inexorably, even righteously to another until the day had gone by: all that righteous cleaning and neatening in the cause of keeping anxiety at bay while I figured out how to approach these untimely readings.

The pioneer modernist poet and novelist, H.D. (a name she adopted for fear that her real name, Hilda Doolittle, might evoke even more scorn for her work as a poet than the already plenteous scorn dished out on women writers in the early 20th century world into which she offered her work), insisted on staying in London during the entirety of World War II, and there she increasingly veered away from the more than slightly esoteric imagism for which she is most famous into something quite different, a near-realistic poetic which spoke in precise, often searing detail about the world she was living in as bombs rained down destruction on the city. At one point, as the writer Maureen N. McLane points out, H.D. moved away from the syncretism that marked so much of her work—in which history and myth and allegory is piled upon itself, almost world without end—and into something else. “And thus she urges: ‘Let us substitute/ enchantment for sentiment, //re-dedicate our gifts/ to spiritual realism.’ She proposes,” McLane says, ‘a counter-enchantment, against fake sentiment, easy political posturing, utilitarian calculation.’” The poems H.D. is then crafting “...are poems of resurrection and return: difficult, incremental, communal. A choral “we” often appears....”\*

Since reading this, my weekly LRB essay (yes, indeed, I am practicing the discipline of reading again, thank you very much), I have been thinking alot about that combination of “spiritual realism” in which enchantment is substituted for “fake sentiment, easy political posturing, [and] utilitarian calculation.”

In our quest for a deep communal faith, those things seem to me to be great hazards. Enchantment, on the other hand, offers life in God that is both realistic and attainable. It is ours, every Sunday, here at this table, in the Eucharist.

How does that address the complexities of righteousness and the challenges of easy self-righteousness, with all their attendant anxieties? Well, I can offer only the summons of the prophets, the psalmist, the preacher Paul, and of Jesus, child of the living God. Hear, and carry out of here with you, the enchanting counter cultural alternatives proposed by them all as definitions of a truer communal righteousness.

Isaiah, speaking as God's own self, asks:

Is this not 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 to bring the homeless poor into your house;

When you see the naked, to cover them,

And not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

And your healing, shall spring up quickly....

Then you shall call...and God will say, "Here I am."

The Psalmist proposes today that

Light shines in the darkness for the upright;...

And then offers us a definition of righteousness:

"The righteous are merciful and full of compassion...

Generous in lending. [They] manage their affairs with justice.

They will not be afraid of any evil rumors.

Their heart is right...

They have given freely to the poor...."

That is indeed a radical vision, offering a different path, a path that leads directly into the loving heart of God, the heart offered us at this Holy Table, from where we, fed from that heart of love, may journey into the world, understanding that "...we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God."

If that is the case, then we are called into a righteousness that reconstructs God's country, here, in our place and time, in this city, in this nation, on this planet. In living that righteousness, rekindled and refreshed by God's Love, we *may* become the salt of the earth, all its saltiness restored. We may *be* the light of the world, unobscured, lighting all the house. We *may* slowly learn the righteousness the prophet Isaiah tells us about. I promise that when we walk together, as one faithful community, into doing the hard work of God's Love, anxiety will vanish and enchantment will light our way.

Amen.

\*Maureen N. McLane, "Trees are complicated," *London Review of Books*, Volume 45, Number 3, 2 February 2023, p.15.