

“A Resume with Failure”

Isaiah 6:1-13

Trinity Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville

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I'm going to begin this morning by telling you about a church.
It's not this church.
And it's not a church that I served.

But I want you to pretend, as you hear this story, that you are a member of the church that I'm about to describe. And I want you to ask yourself what you would have done, had you been a member of that church.

The story is this.

Many years ago, the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann was pastor at a United Church of Christ congregation in NY City.

It had once been a vibrant and bustling congregation.

And every year at strawberry time, the church would have a marvelous strawberry festival. The church basement was filled with excitement and delight, abounding in strawberries and celebration...it was one of the highlights of the church year.

By the time Dr. Brueggemann became pastor, however, the church was in decline. And when strawberry time rolled around, only two dozen or so people came to the festival.

But much to Walter Brueggemann's dismay, the congregation did not set up 25-30 chairs. They insisted on setting up 200 chairs. They put out ALL the tables as if it was yesteryear.

Year after year, they would set up tables for 200 people.

And year after year, there would be MANY uneaten strawberries.

Brueggemann was frustrated with his church.

This was clearly a FAILING TRADITION.

It's a waste of time.

A waste of money.

NO ONE IS PAYING ATTENTION TO THIS FESTIVAL
ANYMORE!!

But the congregation insisted on doing it.

What if people come again?

We want to be ready if people show up.

The congregation felt that God was CALLING them to do it, and there was no talking them out of it.¹

Now...you're a member of that church.

Do you hang on to the festival?

Or do you get rid of it?

On the one hand, Dr. Brueggemann had a point.

It's poor stewardship to keep the festival.

It's living in denial.

An act of nostalgia that leads to more decline...

And yet...I can see the congregation's point.

Numbers are not always a measure of whether or not God is at work in something.

It's an important part of our history, the church said.

People may come again. Who knows what God will do?

¹ A shorter version of this story appears in Walter Brueggemann's sermon "Power to Remember, Freedom to Forget," in his book *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness*, edited by Charles L. Campbell, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996.

We're keeping the festival.
I can see the church's point.

Let's take a vote.
How many of you keep the festival?
How many of you get rid of the festival?

I raise the question about the festival, not because I want you to think about the festival but because I want you to think about failure...

how we define failure,
the role that failure plays in our lives,
the role that failure plays in our faith...

And I ask you to think about all that because of our text for today.
Beautiful text, the call of the prophet Isaiah.

We're in the temple with Isaiah.
God is there, the hem of the Lord's robe filling the temple.
Winged seraphs are there, calling out:
"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts..."

God says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"
Isaiah replies: "Here am I; send me!"

Glorious text, but I wonder if Isaiah would have been so eager had he known what God was going to say next.

In verse 9, God tells Isaiah:

"Go and say to this people:
'Keep listening, but do not comprehend;

keep looking, but do not understand.’
 Make the mind of this people dull,
 and stop their ears,
 and shut their eyes,
 so that they may not look with their eyes,
 and listen with their ears,
 and comprehend with their minds,
 and turn and be healed.”

Whoa!
 Did you catch all that?

When we read the prophet Isaiah, you read some of the most powerful poetry and prophetic preaching in all of scripture. The two books that get cited the most in the New Testament?

The book of Psalms, and the prophet Isaiah.

Every Christmas, what do we look forward to hearing:
 “...a child has been born for us, a son given to us...
 and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...”

This same Isaiah is called by God to go to God’s people,
 to tell them to turn away from their sin,
 to give up their idolatry...
 and happened next?

NOTHING happened next.
 Isaiah’s words fall on DEAF EARS.

God’s people will not listen.
 God’s people will not understand.

Isaiah’s preaching will be INEFFECTIVE.

Isaiah does what God asks him to do, but when it comes to changing the hearts and minds of God's people...he fails.

How are you with failure?
 Is it something that you're comfortable with?
 Do you evaluate decisions based on how likely they will be to fail?
 Is it something that you try to avoid at all costs, or when you cannot avoid it, you try to hide it at all costs?

A colleague and friend of mine from Texas, Karl Travis, had to step down from ministry after 29 years for health reasons. Karl Travis is, in my mind, one of the most effective and faithful pastors to serve our denomination during the past three decades.

He wrote an article recently reflecting on his ministry:
 He didn't write about his success.
 He wrote about his failures.

"I remember the communion service when I sent the juice out before the bread. Only later did I understand the elders' contorted expressions as subtle signals that something wasn't right."

"I have mispronounced names during baptisms, [or] been so anxious about a sermon that I skipped the choir anthem before it."

Then there were the larger blunders, or at least the ones that he wonders about:

"What of the church building we expanded in the 1990s, when the congregation was vibrant and growing? Now [that] congregation is struggling, its classrooms dusty and abandoned. Was that a good use of God's money?"

“How many times were my visions blurred, my insights inadequate...? When did my ego delude me, my narcissism entertain me, my personal needs overshadow my concern for others?”²

Reading Karl’s article, my heart was lifted.
Why was my heart lifted?
Because he was being honest about failure.

Because by listening to his description of failures in his ministry, he was—indirectly—giving me and hundreds of readers permission to embrace our own.

It strikes me that failure is something we hide from most people in our lives, even when—especially when—we come to church. And yet, if there were ever a place in our society where we ought to be able to be honest about what’s broken in our lives, it’s right here in church.

Because God does not want perfection from us.

God wants FAITHFULNESS from us, and I think—I think—part of what this text from Isaiah teaches us is that faithfulness and failure will sometimes GO TOGETHER...

After God tells Isaiah all the ways in which God’s people won’t listen, Isaiah replies, “How long, O Lord?”

To which God says:

“...until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it

² Karl Travis, “Looking back at my ministry from hospice care,” in *The Christian Century*, May 21, 2021 found at [Looking back at my ministry from hospice care | The Christian Century](#).

will be burned again, like...an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.”

“The holy seed is its stump.”

Pay attention to that last verse—it means that when something looks burned out, destroyed, dead, no good—God’s going to grow something from that stump.

Maybe that’s why failure isn’t always a bad thing in God’s eyes.

Because even when failure REALLY HURTS—when a relationship has failed or our bodies have failed or something just happened and it feels like God has failed us...even when all we’re left with is a stump, God can still do something new.

A number of years ago, when I was serving another congregation, I told that story about the strawberry festival. I told it in connection with a piece of land that the church owned, a piece of land that was 10 miles away from the church, a piece of land that was barely ever used by the church anymore.

New members didn’t even know the land existed.

I made a not-so-subtle comparison between that land and the strawberry festival. Why do we still have this land? It’s time to sell the land.

And I thought a few would have a hard time selling it, but that most would say, “You’re right, let’s sell the land.”

So of course, what happened next was that a member of the congregation, a newer member, someone with NO PREVIOUS connection to the land—she was moved to do something to keep it.

She enlisted volunteers.
They cleaned it, they mowed it.
They planted a garden in it.

Her father was a forestry expert, he did a controlled burn on the land.

And before you knew it, the church was using the land again.
Now that wasn't MY plan when I decided to bring it up in a sermon.

I thought that the church's use of the land was over.
It was done.
But God had something else in mind...

In other words, **I WAS** the one who was deaf to what God wanted.
I WAS the one who was blind to the possibilities of God.
Which really makes me reconsider how I hear this text.

See, whenever I hear this text from Isaiah, what's fascinating is where I locate myself in this text.

Every time, it's with Isaiah.

And just like Isaiah, we try to do what God wants us to do—as a parent, as a spouse, as a church member, as a teacher or doctor or lawyer or friend...and many times we make mistakes, but God can still work miracles out of our mistakes.

It's a nice message to take away this morning.

But what if we're not ALWAYS supposed to hear this text as if we were Isaiah? What would happen if we ALSO heard it like we were like the Israelites of old?

Because the truth of the matter is that sometimes I'm pretty sure I know what God wants me to do, and other times I'm baffled by what God wants me to do...and sometimes, I know, but I don't want to listen.

***“Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes...”***

There are times when I know what I'm supposed to do, but I don't want to listen, so I plug my ears, and I shut my eyes.

Have you ever done that?

I don't know about you, but there's this one word that really helps me keep my ears plugged. Whenever I don't want to listen to God, I just shove this word into my mind and my hearing gets really weak.

**You know what that word is?
That word is “never.”**

As in, I'll never be able to understand people who vote OPPOSITE of me, so I'm never going to try.

As in, we'll never get rid of racism in this country, so I'm just going to give up trying.

As in, I'll never be able to forgive that person,
I'll never be able to reconcile with that person...

I'm just sticking with people who make me feel good, my comfortable status quo.

You know what that word “never” does?
It leads to failure.

Failure to act.
Failure to hope.
Failure to imagine the kind of world God calls us to work for...

Have you ever plugged your ears, made your mind dull, shut your eyes with the word “never”?

Let me get at it like this.
It’s a silly example, but stay with me here.

Years ago, when I was leading the youth group at the first church I served, we would have an annual Halloween Carnival. And my role at the carnival was to be Cheeto Head.

Have you ever seen Cheeto Head?
Cheeto Head dresses up in a clown costume.
And puts on face paint.
And puts a shower cap on his head.
And sprays shaving cream all over the shower cap on his head.

And then Cheeto Head sits down on a chair, and the children come up to him, and stand right in front of the chair, and they try to throw Cheetos into the shaving cream that’s on the shower cap on his head.

Every time they get a Cheeto to stick, they win a prize.

Well, the first year we did it, I thought, “Ok, that wasn’t too bad.”

Second year, well, it’s tolerable.
Third year, do I have to do this again?

Fourth year, I was trying to find someone else to do it.
Fifth year, I said to my wife, "I'm NEVER doing that again!"

And wouldn't you know it, we moved the next fall, and I thought I was in the clear. But then, another move, two children, and 10 years later, we began planning for our younger son's birthday party.

And my wife asked me, "Do you know who I think needs to make an appearance at the party?"

I said, "Who?"

She said, "Cheeto Head."

(We were doing a carnival for our then 3-year-old.)

I said, "But I'm never doing that again."

She said, "I'm sending Cheeto Head an invitation."

I said never...but who was I kidding?

At my son's 3-year-old birthday party, Cheeto Head was resurrected from the dead.

Now please don't misunderstand.

I don't think God is hoping to see Cheeto Head any time soon.
But I do think God might be hoping to see something else.

If God comes to you and God asks you do something difficult after the pandemic, like giving more of your time to fight hunger and homelessness and poverty in our society...

If God asks you to do something you did not see yourself doing,
like becoming a pen pal to people in prison...

If God asks you to grow in a new way,
by taking on a role in your church...

If God asks to take a chance with your life and your career,
so that you can serve the Lord more faithfully...

If God asks you to TAKE A STEP that you thought you could
never take...a step that might cause you to stumble or fall or fail...

What will you say?

I hope...I hope...
you answer will be,
“Here am I; send me.”

Amen.