

## Say the Word

Romans 10:5-15

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Prayer: *Eternal God, you are present with us throughout our lives, even when others plot to do us harm. May we learn to live together in unity, that in all we do, we may sing your praises now and forever...*

Tropical storm *Isaias* held changes for many of us. *Isaias* which I learned to pronounce this week, is Spanish for Isaiah, the prophet that is, the one whom Paul is referring to here. This is from a larger section in Romans which I have been working through with you in worship this summer, focusing on the questions of what has gone before, and what the future holds – for all of us.

In Paul's day this was really important to him and to his community. They were particularly concerned about the Jews, who had an uneasy relationship with the Roman Empire. And with the recent events in the life of Jesus called the Christ, the Messiah, where did that leave those large communities of Jews, who were a minority group in a small province in the larger Roman empire?

Paul brings a gentle correction to those who are anxious about current events: "He reminds us that Christ is already present. It is not up to us to save the world. God has already done that. It is up to us to believe that this is true and live as though we believe. We cannot save others by our actions alone. We cannot even save ourselves."<sup>1</sup>

What the apostle is urging is an authentic life; a life of faith. **We** may not be able to change our circumstances, but **faith can transform everything**. It's a shift of attention from "doing" to "being." Not that the believers won't be doing things, they went on to do plenty, but what they did was because of who they were, their new identity, who they had become as Christians. In Paul's rhetoric it is a shift of attention from the boundaries that used to define a circle of believers by the law of God, handed down by Moses; to focus now on the center of the circle, where we see Christ, holding all things together. We are called to focus in the center and to live in the mindfulness of the infinity of the widening circle we are in.

This week *Isaias* brought power failures, storm damage, inconveniences, heartaches, and crises, layered on top of the Covid-19 pandemic challenges and restrictions, protests are still underway across the country, many of them bitter now. Unemployment benefits ran out last week, rental assistance is undecided. And this church is in transition between settled Pastors.

What does it mean in our day, just as Paul grappled with this question in his, to think about what has gone before, and how that informs our future together?

- There are literally billboards up about this right now. How many of us hope to come out of the pandemic better, stronger, more efficient... and maybe even with cleaner basements and garages? For those of us who are well, we've been re-thinking what is worth doing now, what can be done, what needs doing? There are estimates in business

that the pandemic put us about 15 years ahead with our online capacities and infrastructure... because suddenly it became the better way to do lots of things.

- There is a hope that we will take better care of our health after this than we did before. How many of us used to try to work or go to school while we were sick? Or attend important social events with a cold, because we didn't want to let someone down. There's a hope that social pressure will be different after this pandemic. If we are sick we could wear a mask, or stay home, and the decision would not only be socially acceptable, but affirmed.
- Politically in this moment there is a hope that although we are in a time of deep division, when many Americans have found they are unable to even discuss politics civilly with friends and family, there is a hope that we may come through these years with a better appreciation of the freedoms that are important to Americans. That we would value these freedoms and because we value them, we will pass on to the next generation – providing a heritage that is a blessing and not a burden.
- The climate crisis is as serious as it has ever been, but there are good reasons to be hopeful that we are innovating, learning and creating. This used to be a concern of just a few, now even the smallest child learns to recycle and conserve, to appreciate wetlands and vulnerable species – good changes have been made and there are more coming.
- Family life is changing, successful families learn to adapt to the times we are living in, and support each other.
- Diversity is becoming more and more recognizable as valuable and not a liability in communities, in education, in workplaces, and yes the church which should have known that all along. Because it's a value in scripture – neither Jew nor Greek... we are all one in Christ. Paul preached it everywhere he went.
- Our Search Committee and Transition Team have every expectation that our church can and will be better in our future than it has been in the past, because of the past and despite the past. Both!

If we have eyes to see, we see that: "Christ is already present. It is not up to us to save the world. God has already done that. It is up to us to believe that this is true and live as though we believe. We cannot save others by our actions alone. We cannot even save ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

Christ gives us a way of orienting ourselves in the world: with faith, hope and love. And anyone who tells you that that isn't enough... well, you might question their motives...

We are living in a time when a tectonic shift is happening. Our era is often compared to a second Reformation, following Martin Luther's Reformation 500 years ago. Our institutions are failing or changing, education is changing, family life and society is changing, people are redefining their own identities. And as much as these challenges require all hands on deck; they also require for some of us to back off and smell the roses, and allow for the answers to be worked towards

widely. None of us can solve any of these problems alone, but we can work together, we can encourage each other, we can challenge each other and invest in one another.

The problems in our world today tend to be isolating for many of us. You may feel really stuck in the clutches of one or more. Paul wants us to see the application to our lives. Our work is to remember **who** we are in the world, forgiven, loved, valuable children of God. He uses body parts to emphasize this: it's as close as the words on your lips and in your mouth, what is written in your heart guides your feet. And only after you remember who you are, then your "doing" can follow logically from your identity -- your being. In fact, we have to work together for any of these things to happen, there is no way to do them alone.

Paul's masterful summary of the gospel is in verse 9: "...because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." It isn't a formula or an achievement to be had. This is to ground yourself in our identity as Christians – disciples in our day. It is a life to be taken up, intentionally, thoughtfully, prayerfully. And such a life, led by faith, transforms the world ... nevertheless...Paul says: **Say the Word...** an act of resistance and hope...

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<sup>1</sup> Pp. 328 "Pastoral Perspective" *Feasting on the Word* year A vol 3; David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor eds.

<sup>2</sup> Again