*Andi Lloyd*

*1.19.2020*

*Isaiah 49:1-7*

*Listen*

In the summer of 1992,

I moved from Fairbanks, Alaska

to Tucson, Arizona.

I left Fairbanks in the middle of a heat wave.

It was 78 degrees.

Wicked hot, for Fairbanks.

About six days later,

I pulled into Tucson, Arizona.

It was 113 degrees.

It was hot and parched

and I felt like I had moved to the moon.

I briefly questioned my choices.

But I started to get used to it over the months that followed.

And then, one day, something astonishing happened.

The winter rains arrived.

And almost overnight,

another astonishing thing happened:

the desert bloomed.

The parched soil disappeared

under a technicolor blanket

of tiny, flowering desert plants.

It was utterly amazing.

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Today’s passage from Isaiah

reminds me of that.

When I close my eyes, and imagine

what must have happened when his words

flew out into the world, 2500 years ago,

I see the Tucson desert

bursting into bloom.

What that image makes clear to me

is that prophetic speech on its own,

no matter how lovely the words may be,

can’t change the world.

Desert rains need to land on thirsty soil

in order to bring forth new life,

and prophetic words need to land on receptive hearts.

Prophetic speech needs prophetic listening.

And so I don’t think it’s an accident

that the first word spoken

in today’s text is “listen.”

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The Hebrew word translated as “listen”

folds together both the act of *hearing*

and the hearer’s *response*.

It means to hear *intelligently,*

attentively, obediently, even.

The reading from John’s Gospel

offers us a lovely illustration

of what that looks like in practice.

John, remember,

points out Jesus, “the Lamb of God,”

to his two disciples.

The disciples hear.

The disciples follow.

It’s described as if it is one, seamless response.

Listen, follow.

I think that’s what prophetic listening

is all about: a willingness to hear

and to be changed by words,

no matter how impossible those words might sound.

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And Isaiah’s would surely

have sounded impossible.

Isaiah was speaking

from the ruins of life

as he and everyone else knew it.

The people of Judah were in exile in Babylon.

Jerusalem had fallen

after a brutal 18-month siege.

The temple, which they believed to be

God’s dwelling place on earth,

had been destroyed.

The people must have felt

as if their world had ended.

They surely must have feared

that God had abandoned them.

And it’s at that moment, in that place of despair,

Isaiah’s voice rings out,

speaking preposterous hope and newness

into the ruins of an old and broken world.

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I’ve been feeling lately like we’re living

in an Isaiah moment.

Our world feels not quite ruined,

but certainly teetering unsteadily

under the weight of climate change,

the threat of war, the persistence of racism,

the ubiquity of greed.

I know a *lot* of people

standing on the brink of despair.

We are a desert in need of rain.

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I said that to a friend of mine recently –

that I thought we needed an Isaiah:

a prophet, to rise up

and speak hope to our fearful hearts.

She agreed, but wondered aloud

whether we’re capable of *hearing*

a prophetic voice in this noisy, cynical world.

It’s a good question.

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When it rains in the city of Tucson,

the rain that hits the asphalt

just runs off, it doesn’t soak in,

it doesn’t create new life.

Maybe I’m stretching the metaphor,

but it occurs to me to wonder

if maybe our ears have become like asphalt.

In our cynicism, amidst the din around us,

so much of what we hear just runs right off of us.

I think maybe we need to relearn how to be, instead,

like desert soil, parched, but waiting,

ready when the desert rain starts to fall.

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The theologian Walter Brueggemann said

that prophetic speech is “an utterance

that arises ‘from elsewhere,’

from the God who indwells the abyss.”

Prophets speak words of impossible hope.

Consider for a moment

what Isaiah asked his fellow exiles in Babylon.

He asks them to hope not just *any* hope:

not just hope for their own small corner of the world,

but to stand there, in the wreckage of their lives,

and hold a hope big enough for *all* of the nations,

a hope that aims for nothing less than salvation

that reaches “to the end of the earth.”

To a displaced people trapped in despair,

it must have sounded impossible,

like an utterance from elsewhere.

The temptation to dismiss those words

as pie-in-the-sky nonsense must have been strong.

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Prophetic voices speaking impossible hope

are not just a feature of biblical texts.

In the last sermon that Rev. Martin Luther King preached,

the night before his assassination,

he uttered these words.

God, King said, has

*allowed me to go up to the mountain.*

*And I've looked over.*

*And I've seen the Promised Land.*

*I may not get there with you.*

*But I want you to know tonight,*

*that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!*

*And so I'm happy, tonight.*

*I'm not worried about anything.*

*I'm not fearing any man!*

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!*

Like Isaiah, King’s words

ring out like an “utterance from elsewhere,”

a proclamation of profound, convicted hope

that stood strong even amidst a brutal reality.

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What Isaiah is reminding

his people, and us,

is that God holds the future;

God keeps God’s promises.

It’s the same thing that animates

*King’s* words of seemingly impossible hope.

In his essay “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,”

King writes that it is “the power of God”

that transforms “the fatigue of despair

into the buoyancy of hope.”

That transformation is the same one

that we hear in the passage from Isaiah:

the servant initially despairs -

“I have labored in vain,” the servant says.

But then, one verse later,

we hear “God has become my strength,”

and from there the impossible hope flows.

Both King and Isaiah held fast to the truth

that *God’s* imagination is not constrained

by what’s possible for *us*,

nor by *our* current circumstances.

And neither should ours be.

I think that maybe holding that truth

alive in *our* hearts is key to re-learning how to listen

for “utterances from elsewhere,”

for impossible words of hope.

That truth allows us

to hear those words with belief, not cynicism.

It allows those words to fall

on receptive soil.

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Back in early December, there was a worship service

at Marquand Chapel at Yale Divinity School.

The service was a blessing of donations of winter coats

that had been provided to IRIS,

a refugee resettlement agency in New Haven.

At one point, a young high school student,

a refugee who had recently arrived in New Haven,

stepped up to the podium

to describe what IRIS’s work meant for her life.

But she quickly went off script

and started to speak about her experience as a refugee.

She wanted us to know

that what she had learned

in her life as a refugee

was *love*.

She told us about all of the love

that she had found in this world of ours.

That’s what following Jesus Christ meant,

she wanted us to know, it meant *love*,

encounters with impossible, expansive love.

An “utterance from elsewhere.”

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I think about her.

I think about Greta Thunberg,

who, in a recent video making the rounds online,

leans forward with a smile on her face

and says, about the monstrous challenges

of climate change: “we can do this.”

As if it’s the easiest thing in the world.

I think about the Inuk writer Aka Niviana

and the Marshall Islands poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner,

who stood on the Greenland ice in the summer of 2018

and spoke fierce truth to the powers and principalities.

All of them make me think that I was wrong,

when I said that we need a prophet.

They me think that we are already

surrounded by a cloud

of prophetic voices,

speaking the hope we need.

We just need to learn to listen.

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The Tucson desert is full

of a shrub called creosote bush,

whose leaves are covered with a waxy resin.

When the leaves get wet

the resin dissolves, into the air.

And you can smell it.

The Tohono O’Odham people say

that it smells like rain.

You can sometimes smell the rain coming

before you feel the first drops.

I hear the voices

of the young refugee woman in Marquand Chapel,

of Greta Thunberg,

of two indigenous women speaking poetry on an ice cap,

and I feel like I did in Tucson,

when I’d walk outsideon a hot summer day,

one of those days when I’d just about given up

on the rain ever falling and the heat ever breaking,

and I’d smell the rain just over the next ridge.

Life-giving rain is coming.

I can’t explain it,

but I can feel it.

And so I think maybe it’s time,

time to listen for words of impossible hope,

to listen with un-cynical ears,

time to let those words of hope

find their way into our worried hearts,

and then soak it in,

every precious drop.

Hope will bloom.

And then we will do what disciples do:

lend our hands

and our hearts

and our lives

to nurturing the new thing

that God is, even now, bringing forth.

May it be so.

Amen.