

*Based on Isaiah 62:1-2. Committing to the Vision of Beloved Community.*

One of five questions we ask of baptismal candidates - or those making promises for children - is this:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

And then we are invited to respond: *I do*. Or even more emphatically: *I renounce them!*

For SPC, I know, this language sounds way too churchy. Awfully doctrinal. Too focused on all the ways religion brings us down - all that sin and evil stuff - instead of lifting us up with grace and blessing and belovedness. Believe me, I get it.

So when I ask this question of baptismal candidates at SPC, I try to put it in the context of language that sounds more natural to us, that more faithfully fits the SPC script. When I ask the question, I define *the presence of evil in the world as those "powers and principalities" beyond our control that defy God's vision of Beloved Community?*

Evil in this definition is not applied to any particular person or even to any specific human act. Evil in this definition is applied to power that controls and conquers and corrupts, in spite of great effort to resist it.

That sounds a little more palatable to us, I think. Especially this Sunday as we celebrate the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who coined the language of Beloved Community decades ago and cast it as a vision for a nation stained by the original sin of racism. King's vision of Beloved Community finds its roots in the vision of the prophet Isaiah, from whom we receive our Lesson this morning.

The wolf dwelling with the lamb is a vision of Beloved Community rooted in the prophet Isaiah. Turning our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks and our guns into gardening tools is a vision of Beloved Community rooted in the prophet Isaiah. Laying down our sword and shield and studying war no more is a vision of Beloved Community rooted in the prophet Isaiah. Healing a city and cultivating the ecological health of a mountain is a vision of Beloved Community rooted in the prophet Isaiah.

Sounds great, right!? Who could possibly oppose such a vision?

A lot of people, it turns out. And not just in our time in the backlash to Black Lives Matter, and not just in the 1960s in the backlash to the Civil Rights Movement and not just in the 1860s in the backlash to the Abolitionist Movement.

Isaiah, himself, finds himself facing backlash in his time, grappling with a number of naysayers who do not share either his vision or how to achieve it.

By the time we reach the Sixty Second chapter of Isaiah, we are actually on a THIRD prophet, around five hundred years before the time of Jesus, writing in the tradition of a first Isaiah, who began his witness two hundred years earlier.

The first prophet Isaiah, in chapters one through thirty nine of the book that bears his name, warned the people of Jerusalem their city would inevitably collapse from the weight of their insistence on injustice. At the time, this warning is received by many with indifference and then with righteous condemnation.

The second prophet, in chapters forty through fifty-five, comforts the people in exile in Babylon, and holds out hope that they will return to the holy city they call home. At the time, his consolation is received by many with contempt and his hope for return is dismissed with disdain.

Now the third prophet, in chapters fifty-six through sixty six, calls the people who have returned home to a vision of a new, inclusive, Jerusalem, committed to a shared responsibility for shared neighborly needs, and passionately promoting an ethic of justice and peace.

Others have a different idea. Chapters 57 and 59 reveal opponents with a dramatically opposing vision: they want to expel all of the immigrants in their midst. They want to cast off the sexual and gender diversity among them by banning eunuchs. They want to place arbitrary limits on who gets to enter the very house of God.

A painfully divisive polemic emerges: how to Make Jerusalem Great Again? Perhaps even more painful than our own current polemic in this country.

Isaiah resoundingly repudiates the logic of his opponents. But the Books of Nehemiah and Ezra reveal some sound reasoning for the opponents' positions. The people of third Isaiah have only just recently returned from slavery themselves. They are incredibly vulnerable and need protection themselves. They have every reason to believe they need to safeguard their own new found freedom, not risk their own liberation in order to try for - and fail at - Isaiah's vision.

An ugly dispute unfolds, documented in the Bible, that splits the people smack dab down the middle. Fears and dreams on both sides; angers and aspirations on both sides; hates and hopes abounding all around, to the point that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the good guys and the bad guys. *The powers and principalities beyond our control* dwell within the good guys and the bad guys alike.

Martin Luther King, Jr. knows this, as he calls the people to non-violent, loving resistance against evil and its power in the world. He knows the hate and anger and fear left unchecked within himself defies God's vision of Beloved Community just as much as the hate and anger and fear left unchecked within Bull Connor does.

Eugene Carson Blake knows this, as he faces down the forces in our own denomination who threaten his family and his job and his life when he walks as a so-called “race traitor” arm in arm with Dr. King. Eugene Carson Blake knows the hate and anger and fear left unchecked within himself defies God’s vision of Beloved Community just as much as the hate and anger and fear left unchecked within a white supremacist denomination does.

Jesus knows this, as he plunges into the waters of the Jordan and claims his own belovedness as a shield against temptation in the wilderness and then teaches and heals and dies as if God’s vision of Beloved Community has already come on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus knows the hate and anger and fear left unchecked within himself and within his own disciples defies Beloved Community just as much as the hate and anger and fear left unchecked within the occupying power of the Roman Empire and the colluding power of the religious elite does.

The powers and principalities that defy God’s Vision of Beloved Community and disputes over what even constitutes Beloved Community are as old as the prophet Isaiah, himself, and honestly, much older than that.

But Isaiah holds on to hope that the vision itself will eventually override the conflict, as does Jesus, as does Eugene Carson Blake, as does Martin Luther King, Jr.

In what turns out to be his final speech on the night before he is murdered, Dr. King reveals he has been to the mountaintop. He has seen the land of promise and plenty blooming for us all. The vision, for him, has become reality! And he knows we will get there. Someday.

Friends, I know, on this Sunday of all Sundays, we want to live already in the land beyond that mountaintop. I know, on this Sunday of all Sundays, we want to know justice and peace in our time and not just some pie in the sky by and by. I know, on this Sunday of all Sundays, we want a country undivided and racism dismantled and poverty eradicated and militarism divested from and ecological degradation to be healed. And we want it to be without dispute, easy to achieve, because it is so obvious to us that this is the will of God.

Instead, as biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman concludes in his commentary on this Lesson, *There is no way around the dispute.*

The message of the First prophet Isaiah is biblically attested - he is proven right. The message of the Second prophet Isaiah is biblically attested - he was right. But when it comes to the message of the Second prophet Isaiah, Brueggeman says, A last word has not yet been spoken.

But a call to commitment has!

*I will not keep silent*, the prophet proclaims, for the sake of this Holy City that is every city and every nation and every land across the earth, and the mountains and rivers and trees and creatures that populate those cities and nations and lands across the earth.

You and I cannot not keep silent either.

*I will not rest*, the prophet says, until Beloved Community is vindicated, shining like the dawn of a new day, with a flame of healing grace to guide us all into a Land of Promise and Plenty.

You and I cannot rest until that day either.

This is what it means to be asked in our baptism *to renounce evil and its presence in the world - those "powers and principalities" beyond our control that defy God's vision of Beloved Community.*

This is what it means when we respond with a resounding, *I renounce them!*