

# On the Rise: Going Anyway

Preached by

Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

United Church of Fayetteville

May 22, 2022

Sixth Sunday of Easter

**For Reflection** *“Enthusiasm makes ordinary people extraordinary.”* Unknown

**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** *Isaiah 6:1-13*

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” <sup>4</sup>The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

<sup>5</sup>And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” <sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup>The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” <sup>8</sup>Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

<sup>9</sup>And he said, “Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ <sup>10</sup>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.” <sup>11</sup>Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; <sup>12</sup>until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. <sup>13</sup>Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.

**Gospel Reading:** *Matthew 5:14-16*

<sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

**Meditation**      *On the Rise: Going Anyway*

We continue our Eastertide *“On the Rise”* series, again this week focusing on a text provided for consideration of folk coming out of a pandemic and wanting to be strong and vital. Of the many interesting things about these suggested texts was that there was no strongly defined order proposed, nor one-line themes to be extracted from them. So, I was left to reflect and consider our setting. The

folks organizing the study or anyone here might discover something else in the texts that apply to our situation (and the latter would be wonderful for our continuing discussion). What we have been hearing is what I have heard in the texts.

Our reading from Isaiah is familiar to us at least in parts. It is a favorite choice for ordination services, be they for lay officers of the church or clergy. It might be a likely reading for our upcoming reception of seekers into membership and on the same day, the ordination and installation of officers—a day when they publicly acknowledge that they have been called by God to service and are answering, “Here I am, Lord.” And yes, which we will indeed get to sing that today—the hymn perhaps even more beloved than the reading. I might have chosen them both for June 5, but I did not.

There are times when the text and hymn are appropriately quoted in conversation with folk being asked to serve the church and making responses that express their personal sense of inadequacy for the task. But I found myself thinking that it is not only individuals but entire communities which think, believe and, perhaps, even hope they are not equipped for the daunting tasks before them.

An individual’s disclaimers may sound like, “But I am not a professional teacher, so I can’t teach Sunday school.” Or, “I am not sure I should be an officer. I don’t spend a lot of time reading the Bible.” Or, “I am not holy enough to do whatever I am being asked to do. You should find a saint.” We don’t go around burning lips with coals but we do have appropriate responses that encourage people and assure them they are nonetheless equipped.

A community’s disclaimers are more likely to sound like this: “People don’t look for churches right away when they move to town.” True. “We don’t have as many people as we used to.” True. “We don’t have as much money as we used to.” True. “We used to have a 40-member choir.” True. “We used to have classrooms with two teachers for every grade.” Not sure. “We used to have Sunday morning education for all ages.” The culture no longer reserves Sunday morning for worship and study and the church is no longer the only option for continuing education. “We used to have a big youth group that we could call on to do all kinds of cleaning projects.” Because youth are really hoping to be called on to do cleaning projects. “Twenty people used to show up for CROP Walk, now we don’t even go.” Because, they and other similar ventures “teched” themselves out of the Walk by providing opportunities for people to pledge and give on-line.

I and you could go on. But we would only reinforce, not say anything new about what those few examples demonstrate. One) We are grieving a way of life that is gone. Two) There is nothing God might call us to do for which we could not provide a reason why we aren’t equipped. Three) We’ve changed. Four) The world has changed. Some of that is fact; some of it is emotion; some of it is perception. All those responses are human and faithful, just as Isaiah’s was. This is only a problem if we allow ourselves to be stuck in these places, with these feelings and perceptions and not allow ourselves to be healed and equipped as God would do. If we dig in our heels, fold our arms across our chests, lower our heads and frown—nothing happens, nothing changes. And we do not get to sing the song we love, as a community, “Here, we are Lord. Send us.” We are called to do great things, even in small ways, in service of our Lord and a world in need. It is a daunting task to be sure. So let us not forget that we are not self-equipped and we do not go alone.

...

I was doing some reading about change recently, and was reminded of a story about two people in a prison cell. One looked at the window and saw only bars—freedom and a way of life bound away. The other looked past the window and saw stars—life beyond the moment and the glimmering possibility.

Perhaps the best way for us to begin to prepare ourselves for vital life in these new days is to consider how we're looking at the world—blocked by bars or able to see the stars.

I'll start. Our personal, communal, national and international lives have been imprisoned by the Corona virus. It's easy to see the bars. We have worn masks longer than any of us like. We have gotten vaccines to keep us healthy that make us feel rotten. We have missed family and friends, endured restricted or cancelled events, and lost loved one. Those are the bars.

As a community of faith, can we look for the stars? Having much of our life and traditional practice as a congregation stripped away in these past few years, we have the privilege and luxury of evaluating, re-evaluating and choosing what we will restore, what we will do differently and what we will put to reverent rest.

This sermon comes with a challenge. Identify one thing (money, people, young people, mission, whatever) where you have seen only bars to becoming the congregation you dream we might yet be. Then look beyond the bars for the stars. Send me a paragraph about your bars and stars and I'll include them in a section in the weekly email, that we might engender a congregational conversation that will grow this fall and give us all a voice in developing greater strength and vitality. It's daunting to be sure. But we have history on our side. Our Baptist and Presbyterian congregations have been here for close to two and a quarter centuries. The world is different. We are different. We are still here and still serving Christ.

As was Isaiah, we are accompanied by our God who equips us for ministry and who is always doing a new thing. As the world and life opens up, can we see the possibilities, not just of life as it was restored but how life might be made new? In this season of Eastertide, we remember that the Jesus who died was not the Christ who rose. He was changed. Our faith says that those who live and die with him, shall also rise and live with him. Let us not be so foolish as to think we shall not be changed. Let that no longer be our fear. Let it be our hope.

### **Prayers for Others and Ourselves**

Amazing God: Our joy in your Son's resurrection and new life all around us continues. As we embrace a new season of the earth, this day opens our eyes to seasons of life made new through faith.

We are thankful that growth which might seem impossible appears in us as well: retirees learn to surf the net; toddlers learn 10 new words every day; marriages which might have grown stale with time, instead offer partners new mystery, new love and new challenges; relationships which might have died from the wounds of human failure instead, salved with forgiveness, are renewed in commitment; stroke victims learn to walk and cancer goes into remission; people without jobs discover vocations; faith, battered by life's blows, is sustained and strengthened by a community of your Son. Help us to sing our Alleluias, nourishing growth in the fallow places that we might gratefully proclaim Easter every day.

As we pray with thanksgiving for new life, we are mindful of all the places where death still seems the victor. Help us to be present to all those people for whom love seems an impossible dream; those for whom disease still reigns; those who have not yet overcome the power of drugs or alcohol; those who mourn a fresh grave; those in every place on the globe who pray for sons and daughters, wives and husbands to return safely from war and to all who are afraid to trust that healing, comfort and peace are your will, your way and your promise. Let us use our joy not to demean pain, but to minister to it. Let us hold up a light of hope that does not deny shadows. Let us open our arms in Christ-like compassion that our very presence might be a transforming promise of the possible. Help us to honor

the reality that Easter dawns on different days, in different ways and not always as we imagine. Let us be not afraid, so that we might be vulnerable to unexpected life in ourselves and others.

We pray that you bring us as one people, with strong or stumbling steps together into the life abundant as we pray the prayer your Son, Risen Again Indeed! has taught us to pray...

### **The Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done**

**on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day, our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors**

**and lead us not into temptation,**

**but deliver us from evil,**

**for thine is the kingdom and the power**

**and the glory forever. Amen.**