

Pentecost 14C + August 21, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Isaiah 58:9b-14: "Repairer of the Breach"

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"A picture is worth a thousand words." Images are often able to convey complex ideas in a way that words cannot. But rarely in recent years has there been more truth to this than with a photograph taken Wednesday night in Syria. By Thursday it had gone viral, so to speak and by Friday morning it was on the front page of the New York Times.

The photo shows a small boy, stunned and weary-looking. He is sitting in an ambulance, his face caked with dirt and blood. This is five-year-old Omran Daqneesh. His home in Aleppo had been bombed by a Russian airstrike. Rescuers were pulling victims from the rubble and passing them from one area to another. After three lifeless bodies had been passed along, someone handed this young boy to photojournalist Mahmoud Raslan. He handed Omran to another worker, who rushed him to the waiting ambulance. Raslan followed and quickly snapped the picture, capturing an image that has transfixed millions across the globe and catalyzed the desire for warring nations to end their madness.

What people are seeing, I think, is not a small boy in pain, or even the tragedy of an innocent child who may have lost his family. They are seeing in Omran's traumatized stare the weariness of war and the suffering of an entire people whose own government is supporting attacks such as this one, whose lives and futures are being shattered day after day. Where will it end? How will it end? And what is the human cost?

*Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt [says the prophet Isaiah];
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called repairer of the breach, restorer of streets to live in.*

Who is this repairer? How will it happen? Who can repair a torn world, where governments turn on their own citizens and communities of people turn on themselves? Consider our nation, a community of Americans, in which we are supposedly bound by the same ideals of freedom, equality and dignity for all (even if these often aren't realized). But look at all the hatred that soaks our political landscape, and by the way, weak apologies don't erase hurtful words that have been spoken and repeated until they are accepted by some as gospel truth.

And what about breaches within our communities of faith? Thriving congregations have been undone by issues that, because of fear, became deeply divisive. Here at Atonement we must be on guard even still not to repeat patterns of behavior that nearly brought an end to our long and proud history. Division happens when people live in fear and are afraid to share openly what is on their minds and hearts, and when others refuse to accept these sincere expressions. But I am here to tell you that your thoughts, ideas and feelings about any and all aspects of our life as a congregation not only may but MUST be shared with me as your pastor, and with members of the church council. You will be received with open arms. As the body of Christ, we open our hearts to God but we also open them to each other. Only when we are no longer afraid to do this can Atonement Lutheran Church truly be restored. This is the only way we can fruitfully live together.

You shall be called repairer of the breach, restorer of streets to live in.

Who is the repairer, the restorer of streets to live in – for us, and for Omran Daqneesh and so many like him? It's easy to say, "Jesus," but that doesn't get us from here to there.

The context for these memorable words from Isaiah 58 is that the prophet has been condemning Israel's worship of other gods. "When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver

you!” he says scornfully in the preceding chapter. “The wind will carry them off, a breath will take them away. *But whoever takes refuge in me shall possess the land and inherit my holy mountain.*”

The idea of taking refuge in God reminds us of Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. *Therefore, we will not fear....*”

Having a refuge means we are safe. We are safe because we trust that we are well protected. We trust completely that God loves us and that God will care for us. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart,” we hear in Proverbs 3:5, “and lean not on your own understanding.” Don’t rationalize your way out of the fact that God loves each and every one of us, no matter what we have or haven’t done, with a love that is beyond comprehension—a love that comes to us in the person of God’s own son, Jesus Christ. God anoints us as his beloved children, and our cup overflows with love. What happens to this overflowing? It floods back out into the world, only to be returned in greater measure to God, who returns it to us—a never-ending cycle until that great and glorious last day!

With this, we can circle back to the little Omran. Who can repair his shattered world? Who can restore the streets of Aleppo so that he will once again play in them as any child would? We can—God’s people, so secure in our Savior’s love for us that it is second nature to share that with others. We don’t fast or perform other acts of penitence, Isaiah says in our reading, just to prove a point so that we can feel superior. Instead, we share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless into our house, clothe the naked, let the oppressed go free. And for the sake of God and for the world, we settle our fear-driven disputes over power, territory, and control so that, in some bright future, we may never again be haunted by such an image of the face of a child.

“Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly...Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’” AMEN.