

UNLESS THE CRY IS HEARD, THE CITY WILL NOT FLOURISH.

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I

In the email containing the invitation to address this gathering, Rev. Nannette Banks wrote a striking sentence which has guided me strongly in my thinking on what to say today. She said, “We want to think about a flourishing city in the midst of political, murderous upheaval.” For people to flourish, writes Reformed philosopher and theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, there must be justice. He is right. The undoing of injustice and the doing of justice is what allows God’s children, especially God’s little ones, to flourish: to be able to respond completely to the potential God has designed for, and implanted in them. “What God desires for God’s human creatures” Wolterstorff writes, is that comprehensive mode of flourishing that is shalom.”

But Rev. Banks’ words also contain a sober warning: we speak of flourishing *in a world of upheaval* and this upheaval is caused by the politics of deceit, oppression, injustice, and death. It is not just deceitful, oppressive and unjust – it is *murderously* so. Without the active *undoing* of injustice and the active doing of justice, flourishing is not possible. Flourishing is the restoration of justice, rights, dignity, and the creation of a beloved, reconciled community. To be clear: I am speaking of justice as distributive justice, when power, goods and rights are distributed amongst the people on a basis of equity, when people enjoy those goods to which they have a rightful claim: among others, protection against assault, exploitation and exclusion; freedom from want, and fear, and neglect. This is the justice that fosters reconciliation as a gospel imperative, not as shallow, quietistic sentimentalism. I, together with my friend and co-author

Dr. Curtiss Paul DeYoung, am speaking of reconciliation as real, radical, and revolutionary: It is real, because it resists being a cover for political pietism and Christian quietism. It is much more than the establishment of harmonious personal relationships. It is about the restoration of justice, rights, and human dignity. It is never shallow or cheap, but costly, because it goes to the roots of things. And it is revolutionary, because it seeks the transformation of persons and societies, their beliefs and dominating narratives, their systems and structures. It seeks no less than the transformation of the world God because it is the ministry through which God, through Christ, is reconciling *the world* unto Godself.

When reconciliation is this - when justice and peace embrace, and when the hunger for justice is stilled and the thirst for righteousness is slaked; when the poor hear the good news, the captives are freed, and the oppressed are liberated; when peace is not the absence of violence but the active presence of justice; when God's longing for justice is fulfilled and the pain of God at the suffering of God's people is turned to joy by our undoing of injustice and our doing of justice - it is then that God's people flourish.

When this flourishing is denied the cry for justice rises up.

II

The voice we hear and respond to is the voice of the ones made voiceless, the poor and oppressed; those who are the faces at the bottom of the well. In those voices, is the forceful argument of John Calvin, we hear the very voice of God:

Tyrants and their cruelty cannot be endured without great weariness and sorrow... Hence almost the whole world sounds forth these words, 'How long?' When anyone disturbs the whole world by his ambition and avarice, or everywhere commits plunders, or oppresses miserable nations, when he distresses the innocent, all cry out, 'How long?' And this

cry, proceeding as it does from the feeling of nature and the dictates of justice, is at length heard by the Lord... [The oppressed] know that this confusion of order and justice is not to be endured. And this feeling, is it not implanted by the Lord? *It is then the same as though God heard Godself, when God hears the cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice.*

In this one remarkable paragraph, Calvin helps us to understand a number of issues. Notice first the emphasis on the indivisibility of justice. Martin Luther King Jr., was right: injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere. Calvin's repeated "the whole world" is not just rhetorical hyperbole, poetic metaphor, or oratorical tactic. It is a keen awareness of the impact of injustice on humanity as a whole, an awareness, to quote yet another famous word of Martin Luther King, Jr., of the "inescapable network of mutuality" and the "common garment of destiny," of our common yearning for justice and of the need for human solidarity in resisting injustice and striving for justice. It understands the workings of power and the destruction wrought by power "divorced from the fear of God" as Calvin states elsewhere. It is remarkable how relevant this insight has become in our globalized political and economic power realities and in the deadly stranglehold of a few - the now universally recognized 1%! - on the rest of humanity and on creation as a whole.

Second, Calvin understands the difference between "order" and "justice" and refuses to accept that tyranny, injustice, and oppression should be tolerated as necessary for "order," or more precisely, *mistaken* for order. Calvin calls this a "confusion." For Calvin - despite his grave concern for order in society and his fear of chaos, or perhaps better put, *because of* his concern for proper order in society - "order", or in its other, often used, and always lethal combination, "law and order", in our global reality more and more parading as "national security" - is not the enforced state of confusion when the law, violence, and the abuse of power are used to protect the position of the powerful and privileged and to keep the poor impoverished and the subjugated silent. Order prevails when

compassionate justice is done and there is no confusion about right and wrong in society. We, hearing and responding to that cry, making political judgments and calling upon the church to act will, I think, embrace theologian Paul Lehmann's contention about what he calls "the proper priorities of politics." Lehmann argues that "Freedom is the presupposition and the condition of order: order is not the presupposition and condition of freedom. Justice is the foundation and criterion of law; law is not the foundation and criterion of justice. These are the proper priorities of politics." That is how we avoid the confusing that subverts justice and prevents flourishing.

Third, the cry for justice is not only implanted *by* the Lord; it is as though God hears Godself when the oppressed cry "How long?" Their cry is God's cry, emanating from the heart of a God wounded by the injustices inflicted upon the poor and defenseless. It is vital that we understand injustice and injury inflicted upon God's children as wounds inflicted *upon God*. At the center of our theology of social justice is our reverence for, and our grieving with, a wounded God.

Fourth, if it is true that God is not just hearing the poor and oppressed when they cry out against injustice, but God is hearing God's own self in their cries, it means that God is not just the God *of* the poor; God *becomes* the poor and oppressed, wounded by the injustices inflicted upon them. Furthermore, Calvin speaks of all those "who cannot bear injustice." In other words, not only those upon whom injustice is inflicted, but those who cry out *on their behalf*, and therefore do what is right and just. In their cry as well God hears Godself, and in their doing of justice the wounds of God are healed.

III

Today, if we care to listen, the cry is heard from everywhere. From the Arab Spring: *al-Sha'b Isqat al-Nizam!* (The People Demand the Overthrow of the Regime!) From South Africa: "Injustice Must Fall!" From occupied Jerusalem, "I am not leaving!" From the United States, "Black Lives Matter!", and from Palestine the simple, but utterly convincing truth because it is prophetic and

one of the most audaciously hopeful and defiant cries I know, written on that infamous Israeli apartheid wall: “This Wall May Take Care Of The Present But It Has NO Future.” It is coming from different contexts, from different points across the globe, but it is one cry. In many places that cry may have been stifled in all the brutal ways tyranny can devise, but it cannot be stilled. The world had heard, may try to ignore, deny, or viciously suppress, but can no longer unhear the defiant, courageous, hopeful cry. Like William Cullen Bryant’s truth crushed to earth, it shall rise again and again.

It is the cry itself, in the voices of the people, in the resilient hope of the people struggling for justice and human dignity; in the persistent rejection of the Empire’s power over their lives that constitutes at once the critique of Empire and the resistance against Empire. The cry ringing across the world is resistance against Empire because it reveals truth. Mendacity is the life-blood of empires. Empires cannot live without it. It lies about itself, about the realities of oppression, domination and subjugation. It lies about the people: not just about what the people need, but about what the people deserve and are entitled to. It proclaims that whatever is good for the empire is good for the world. The cry for justice, freedom and dignity exposes the truth about the empire, but simultaneously it reveals the truth about the people: their outrage at injustice and their longings for justice; their outrage at oppression and their love for freedom; their outrage at exploitation and their desire for dignity, their outrage at the destruction of their lives and their strength in the indestructibility of their hope.

It is a cry against the consciously induced, politically manipulated fear that has become such a frightening reality in modern day politics, fueled and carefully managed by shameless politics and its adherents in the mainstream mass media, calculated to prevent the people from thinking for themselves about what is presented to them, the choices they make and the consequences of these, but also questioning the power of empire in fear of losing its

“protection.” The wave after wave of protests on the streets in the face of armies of occupation and police acting like armies of occupation; the “days of rage” against an empire whose power lies in the constant rage of domination, intimidation and threat of annihilation are so much more than “protest”. They are, in innovative and persistent ways, revolutionary resistance against fear. The brutal retaliation we are seeing is not just an effort to stamp out the resistance; it is a systematic attempt to destroy the courage and love of freedom that defy that fear.

Twenty-one years ago theologian and social activist Jim Wallis already saw which we can recognize today as at the heart of the murderous upheaval holding our world in its grip. He agonizes about the state of politics in the United States and the world and despairs at what he sees.

Our most basic virtues of civility, responsibility, justice and integrity seem to be collapsing. We appear to be losing the ethics derived from personal commitment, social purpose and spiritual meaning. The triumph of materialism is hardly questioned now... We are divided along the lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, culture and tribe... Our intuition tells us the depth of the crisis we face demands more than politics as usual. An illness of the spirit has spread across the land...

Looking at the US today, hearing the demeaning, disturbing, dispiriting political discourse, seeing the worship of violence replacing the worship of the God of Jesus of Nazareth, and seeing the despair this heaps upon millions here and across the globe, Wallis had no idea he would be so right. But this “illness of the spirit” has created a world in political, murderous upheaval.

Just over 15 years ago, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann understood what this means: the crisis we are facing is much more than a human-made political, socio-economic crisis, he argues. He exposes something deeper.

“Our social and political frigidity towards the disadvantaged, the poor and the humiliated is an expression of our frigidity towards God. The cynicism of modern

political and economic manipulators is an expression of our contempt for God. We have lost God, and God has left us, so we are bothered, neither by the suffering of others *which we have caused*, nor by the debts we are leaving behind for the coming generations.”

If we are to recover our compassion in our renewed relationship with God, if we are to battle against this illness of the spirit, we first have to hear the cry. Calvin stood on firm biblical grounds when he made his statement.

III

In the book of the prophet Micha we hear two cries from the heart of Yahweh: The first, in 1:8, is a cry of lamentation.

“For this I will lament and wail; I will go barefoot and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches.”

In 6:9-12 however, Yahweh’s cry is not an anguished lament. It is an amazing passage of verses that arrest the imagination. Here, Yahweh traverses the streets of the city, not aimlessly, but pointedly, naming the places of iniquity from whence emanates the misery of the poor. Yahweh utters a steady litany of deliberate judgment. But it is a *cry*, loud enough for all to hear. Underneath the measured tones is the drumbeat of divine distress, for the city is not flourishing.

There is wealth and prosperity, self-satisfaction and arrogance, but there is no flourishing. Micah is specific: it is a cry to the *city*, the citadel of domination, the seat of all sorts of power, the dwelling place of the rich and privileged, where the poor and destitute live lives of cringing, desperate resignation in the shadow of shameless ostentation. Furthermore, it is not a cry against random and incidental injustices: the city represents entrenched, legalized, and legitimized systems of injustice that pervade every area of life. That is why Yahweh cries judgment and condemnation against the “tribe and the assembly”, that is, the gatherings of the powerful who make decisions for the city, who

devise the laws and policies that shape the political economy of the people as a whole. But their concern is not for the people in their need or for justice in its lingering absence. Their concern is only for themselves, their own enrichment and self-satisfaction.

The city, where the exercise of power is most undeniable; where the great plans are contrived in the palaces and the Temple; where the yawning gap between the rich and the poor is most stark, most disturbing and most scandalous. The city: the center of business where the deals are negotiated among the powerful that crush the poor and favor the rich; where the business of making money continues undisturbed while the lives of the poor suffer devastating disruption. This is the place where the spoils from the exploitation of the disinherited rural poor are brought to swell the already overflowing coffers of the rich. The city: where the violence of the wealthy is sanctified by the soothing presence of the Temple as the religious elites connive with the politically and economically powerful to oppress and exploit the poor.

It is here where the judgment of Yahweh resounds, echoing from those walls within which the powerful deem themselves safe and secure. This cry is not uncontrolled emotion, but clear-headed analysis of systemic oppression. This is not a whisper in the ear of one or two, but a loud cry of outrage and deliberate *j'accuse* to the ruling elites of the city where are stashed “the treasures of wickedness”, where they keep “wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights”, measuring with the “scant measure that is accursed.” “Shall I tolerate all this?” Yahweh cries. Micah does not fail to understand and name greed and the perversion of justice in the courts for what they are: systematized violence. God cries to the city where “your wealthy are full of violence” and where the powerful speak with “tongues of deceit.” God cries out against every instrument of oppression and exploitation used to crush the poor and the weak.

Notice that the powerful elites are inflicting all this pain on the downtrodden and defenseless, but it is *Yahweh* who cries, “O my people, what

have I done to you?” (6:3) This is what Calvin understood so well. Micah foreshadows Jesus: “What you have done to the least of these, you have done to me.” (Matt. 25) The city does not flourish, for those in positions of power and privilege refuse to hear the cry of the poor as it emanates from God’s heart.

For this reason the prophet interrupts himself in 2:6 to turn to that ever present demand from the powerful and those who profit from systemic oppression: “Do not preach - thus *they* preach - one should not preach of such things.” Again and again, as we shall see with Amos as well, those who benefit from lies and deception cannot stand the word of prophetic truth. They want preachers who soothe and justify, who will say, “I will preach to you of wine and strong drink.” How shall we understand this curious phrase? As biting sarcasm, I think. Shall we, the prophet seems to ask, make God the topic of a light-hearted happy-hour chat? Who speaks of judgment and condemnation over a glass of cabernet? Or shall excessive drinking and reveling and womanizing be the immorality I will address, never breathing a word about the immorality of socio-economic injustice, of your violence against the defenseless, of your war against the poor and of the systemic oppression which makes you rich? “Such a one would be a preacher for this people!”

The true prophet of God, however, is the preacher who will not satisfy the people with empty platitudes, soothing words and the superficial telling of comforting stories; speaking of a God whose patience is never exhausted, who rewards the people for their self-styled “uprightness” while ignoring the injustices they do. They seek to disable the judgment of God with the love of God, proclaiming that a loving God cannot judge their wickedness: “Are these his doings?” they ask with the perplexity of the pampered.

They seek a preacher who will speak of a God who, like them, does not see the misery of the oppressed and therefore is not disturbed by it; who, like them, do evil and forget about it as if it does not matter, because the lives of the defenseless and the poor do not matter; who tolerate wickedness because

the profits it generates are just too great to resist. To preach about a God who has no option but to side with the powerful because they are, in the jargon of neo-liberal capitalism, “too big to fail”. Micah’s God of justice, however, cannot forget: “Can I forget...?” Yahweh cries; “Can I tolerate...?” Instead of seeking to be in their good graces by praising them, Yahweh announces judgment: “You shall bear the scorn of my people...” (6:16). That means that for the prophetic preacher, the pulpit is a place of compassionate remembering, not a place of pietistic amnesia. That means that the prophetic preacher is one who, like Frederick Douglass, understands the difference between religion and faith:

“I love the religion of our blessed Savior ... which comes from above, in the wisdom of God which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle ... without partiality and without hypocrisy ... which makes it the duty of its disciples to visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction. I love that religion ... It is because I love this religion that I hate the slaveholding, the woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion that exists in America ... loving the one I must hate the other; holding to one I must reject the other.”

Please note another thing. The powerful, not wanting to be reminded of the fact that Yahweh does not forget, seek to disempower the prophet with *their* power. But Micah is clear: over against their power the prophet speaks with a different kind of power: “As for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might.” (3:8) Theirs is the power of boundless arrogance, of ruthless intimidation and threat as we have seen in 2:1; his is the power of justice. It is a powerful reminder of the source of the strength of true prophetic witness. This is the power that derives from the humble walk with God.

Walking humbly with God is walking with Jesus, *seeing*, not just looking at, the oppressed and the captives, working for their liberation, understanding not only that they are in prison but taking the key to the prison from the one holding it and unlocking the door. It is walking among the poor and the

destitute, sharing their struggles for life and dignity and bringing them the good news of God's justice. It is seeing the wounds of the broken-hearted and binding them, humbled into deeds of restitution and restoration and justice because we know that these are wounds we have inflicted. It is living among them the new reality of the reign of God that will challenge and break the deadly grip of the systems of domination and powers of enslavement on their lives.

Walking with God is to stand where God stands, to fight for whom God fights: the poor, the weak, the defenseless, the despised, the threatened, the excluded. It is to have the courage to know that trepidation before the might of the powerful is overturned by the fear of the Lord and the love of Christ. It is to understand, unequivocally and with a clarity that is both humbling and liberating, that justice is what Yahweh requires. Walking with God is knowing that our souls tremble before God so that our knees do not tremble when we face the powerful and the mighty of this world.

Walking humbly with God means being humbled by what we see, by what we are doing to others, by our capacity for harm and destruction in what we are wreaking upon the Earth and all of God's creation. Walking with God is learning to let the Holy Spirit have her way, to let us be astounded by what we can do in God's name, for Jesus is Lord.

It is walking with Jesus, standing in the breach between the violence of the powerful and the victims of their blood lust. It is walking with Jesus, making the wounded whole, healing the sick, touching the untouchables and overturning the thrones of the Untouchables. Stepping aside to give women their rightful place; weeping with those who mourn, releasing the life-giving power of the word of the kingdom; challenging the powerful on the matters of justice and mercy, in their temples and their palaces, giving notice that the reign of God is here.

Walking humbly with God is walking with Jesus, step by step through Gethsemane, perhaps not unflinchingly and fearlessly but nonetheless faithfully, running the gauntlet through the scoffers and the mocking laughter and the pointing fingers. It is walking with Jesus up that hill, hanging on that cross with him, not knowing with certainty but believing with all our heart that the grave has no power to hold us, just as it had no power to hold Jesus; that we will rise up with him in God's rebellion against evil, against the bigger and bigger lies, against the death-dealing rhetoric of the barricades, against the powers of death and destruction. That is the walk with God that breaks down our resistance to prophetic faithfulness.

In as many ways as we can count ours is a world in murderous upheaval. The combined wealth of the world's richest 1% will overtake that of the other 99% before 2016 is over. One in nine people do not have enough to eat and more than 1 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day. The so-called economic recovery of the last few years was in essence only a recovery for the rich: the richest 1% have seen their share of the global wealth increase from 44% in 2009 to 48% in 2014, and will climb to more than 50% in 2016. In concrete terms members of the global elite had an average wealth of \$2.7m per adult in 2014. In comparison 80% of the world's population had an average of a mere \$3,851 per adult. In a time of economic crisis and calls for more austerity for the working classes the wealth of the richest 80% doubled in cash terms between 2009 and 2014. They are crying out: How long?

Unless the cry is heard, the cities of the world cannot flourish.

In cities all over the United States, a black person is slaughtered by a law enforcement agent or someone in a uniform every 28 hours. By now the names of the men and boys are well known. But what about the women? Sandra Bland, viciously mauled by a Texas cop and later found dead in her jail cell. In Cleveland: Tanisha Anderson and Malissa Williams; in Bastrop, Texas: Yvette Smith. Miriam Carey, Washington DC; Shelly Frey, Houston; Danisha Harris,

Breaux Bridge, Louisiana. In Los Angeles, Alesia Thomas; in Chicago, Rekia Boyd. Shantel Davis, Alberta Spruill, and Shereese Francis, all from New York City. Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Detroit; Tarika Wilson, Lima, Ohio; Kathryn Johnston, Atlanta, and Kendra James, Portland Oregon.

“Here we are again, saying her name, no, crying out her name as Rachel cried in lament,” my Sister Rev. Waltrina Middleton cries in her beautiful poem about these women, *Our Rivers Run Deep*:

“We know rivers. This is our Ramah...This is our Fergusson... our Baltimore...

This is our Charleston... our Cleveland... our Staten Island.

Our rivers run deep and they speak of oceans that run deeper.

Meet me at the river, brother, meet me at the river, mother, meet me at the river, sister... meet at the river, prophets, made with fresh tears as deep as sorrows go...”

Unless the cry is heard the city cannot be healed.

It is now clear that the poisoned water that the city’s people are forced to drink is not the result of an accident: it’s the result of years of devastating free-market policies and ‘reforms’, enduring systemic racism and cold, calculated politics of exploitation, neglect, exclusion, and callous carelessness. However, despite the fact that that the state’s culpability is now beyond dispute, “the city’s government continues to charge people for the poisoned water and then threatening to foreclose their homes or take their children if they refuse to pay.”

Journalist Elna Boesak says that there are things that are forgivable, but never excusable. She talks about South Africa, but in America is a perfect illustration of what I think she means. Michael Moore, one-time Flint resident, film maker, and activist for justice, in responding to those who seek to help the

residents of Flint by donating bottled water explains why they cannot really “help”:

The reason you can't help is that you cannot reverse the irreversible brain damage that has been inflicted upon every single child in Flint. The damage is permanent. There is no medicine you can send, no doctor or scientist who has any way to undo the harm done to thousands of babies, toddlers, and children (not to mention their parents). They are ruined for life, and someone needs to tell the truth about that. They will, forever, suffer from the various neurological impediments, their IQs will be lowered by at least 20 points, they will not do as well in school and, by the time they reach adolescence, they will exhibit various behavioral problems that will land a number of them in trouble, and some in jail... This is a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. There is not a terrorist organization on Earth that has yet to figure out how to poison 100,000 people every day for two years - and get away with it. That took a Governor who subscribes to an American political ideology hell-bent on widening the income inequality gap and conducting various versions of voter and electoral suppression against people of color and the poor.

What does it mean to speak of flourishing in the presence of the parents of Flint, Michigan, and looking into the eyes of their children?

Unless the cry is heard, the city cannot be reconciled, and without reconciliation it cannot flourish.

All over the world, but especially in Africa, God's LGBTQI children, are shamed, targeted, threatened, humiliated, hunted down. Every imaginable and unimaginable indignity is heaped upon them, and in countries like Uganda and Nigeria they are criminalized and killed - all in the name of a terrifyingly homophobic Jesus. They are crying out, how long?.

Unless the cry is heard, dignity will not be restored, the church will not find its prophetic voice, the city will not find its healing. It will not flourish.

IV

But because it is God, a compassionate, justice-loving, peace-bringing, hope giving God, the cry is heard. That is why Isaiah 65: 17-25 is in the Bible. Because I have heard the cry, says Yahweh in Exodus 3, I will come down and rescue you from the hand of your slave masters. Because I have heard the cry, Yahweh says now, I will not just come down and rescue; I will create anew. Because this time it is not just about you - it is about every enslaved person, wherever they may be. This time it is not just about your city; it is about every city where my people dwell. This time it is not about your land, it is about the whole world, the world I have created that you have polluted with your sin and destruction and violence: that world I will create anew and reclaim for myself.

So we have Isaiah's city of joy and delight contrasting Micha's city of misery and pain. In his delightful hymn of joy, Isaiah's delight grows in intensity and particularity.

I am about to create, says Yahweh, new heavens and a new earth. That's cosmic, but for God "cosmic" recreation is not enough. There cannot be a new heaven without a new earth, but there cannot be a new earth without a new city. That is already intense. But the intensity is not in creative power, it is in creative love and compassionate justice. There has to be a new city, *because that's where the lives of God's people are most explicit*. The love is in the details. If it is not about God's people, it's about nothing at all. Just listen to how Isaiah puts this. "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth." Period. It is an announcement. On its own that is amazing enough. But then the announcement becomes the tidings of great joy, and God wants us to know this: "But be glad, and rejoice forever in what I am creating: Now, Jerusalem as a *city of joy*." But even that is not all: "And its people as a delight."

Now the people who once lived in darkness (Is. 9) have not only seen a great light, they themselves are a delight. For whom? For God, surely, but also for the world, according to Isaiah. Because of the One upon whom God's Spirit rests, says Isaiah 42, "the One in whom my soul delights; who will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth." And because God's love of justice is now embraced by God's people. "I have [created] you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations," because you now know to follow the ways of justice, peace and love.

The city under siege, the city where injustice reigned, that city in murderous upheaval - that city is now the city of joy. That city is flourishing.

That city that followed the ways of empire; that despised the poor and trampled their heads into the dust, where the needy were oppressed and the widow and orphan exploited and robbed, becomes the city where the poor hear the good news that God is with them in their struggles for justice. That city is flourishing.

That city where the Temple was turned into a den of robbers, a place where they brought their spoils taken from the poor, a holy place where they sought refuge from the wrath of the Holy One - that city has become the place where a temple shall arise to be a house of prayer for all nations. That city is flourishing.

That city where innocent blood was shed and the prophets were killed; that city where the cross arose upon that hill has now become the city where the stone was rolled away, not so that Jesus could get out, but so that the disciples could go in and see that the women were right: he is not dead, but he lives. And because of that open tomb, that city is flourishing.

And then, only when the people have become a delight, a covenant and a light for the world, only then does Yahweh return to make the recreation whole: "The earth shall be restored" says the prophet. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed

together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox... they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.” We should hear this: only when God’s people have turned away from our lust for domination, our greed and our violence; only when through the doing of justice and the making of peace we have become not a threat but a delight, only then can creation itself be restored. When our unnatural worship of violence is ended, the violence of nature is no longer natural. Our remorse, repentance, and conversion guarantee the turning point for God’s creation.

In that city of joy the crushing, murderous upheaval has been ended. Isaiah’s hymn, from verses 19-25, is all about a city where justice and peace embrace. “No more shall be in it...” is the joyful, delightful refrain and it’s all about the end of violence of any kind. In the walls of that city the breaches of oppression, violence, and injustice have been sealed. The gates of justice are now opened wide.

Isaiah catches the rhythm and passes it on like an African preacher on fire:

No more disasters, no more war, no more infants dying untimely deaths, no more calling you old when you hit a hundred. No more, no more!

No more building a house for someone else to steal through war, or taxes, or crooked banks; No more, no more!

No more planting of vineyards for someone more powerful to enjoy the wine; no more working for slave’s wages, no more worries about the calamities the powerful need to sustain and increase their wealth and power.

No more! No more!

The pain and the suffering of the women because of our sanctified patriarchy and our baptized Phariseeism – no more!

That sound of weeping that reverberates off that Apartheid wall that slices through Palestine – no more!

That cry of distress from Ferguson and Baltimore, from Oakland and New York City, from Long Island and Chicago because black lives do not matter – no more!

That bigoted outrage against God's LGBTQI children everywhere – no more!

The city shall be redeemed; the city shall flourish; and the people will sing:

No more shall there be in it (no more.. no more...)

No more shall be heard in it (no more... no more...)

No more dyin' in it; no more cryin' in it (no more, no more!)

For the church has heard, the city flourishes, the world lives! Hallelujah!