

December 8, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
Title “Rhythm of Connectedness”
Text: Isaiah 40: 3-5



Before cell phones and text messages; before email and satellite; before telegraph and telegram; before pony express or snail mail; there were drums.

Chinua Achebe writes, “The fire dances under the starlit sky outlining people sitting in their doorways. All ears perk and heads turn to listen when the distant beat begins. Go-di-di-go-go. Di-go-g-di-go. The talking drum is speaking to the clan. One of the things every man learned was the language of the hollowed-out wooden instrument. Dium! Dium! Dium! Boomed the sounds at intervals. All listened anxiously. It was the beat of death. Di-go-go-di-go-di-di-go-go floated the message again. The ekwe carried the news of the death to all nine villages and beyond. It began by naming the clan: Umuofia obodo dike, umoufia obodo dike,.. It said it over and over again. Then it named the village. At last the man was named.”

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News traveled: death, birth, war, peace, clan meeting, sacred ritual; news traveled by drums and in song. Distance boundaries were broken; communities were gathered; joys were shared; dangers forewarned. From villages across Africa to Persia and India, across Europe and Asia. From the Aborigines of Australia to the native peoples of Siberia, boundaries of separation were spanned by the same ancient tool fashioned uniquely by each culture.

The prophet Miriam , sister of Moses, led the Israelites out of slavery into freedom playing her tambourine with all the women dancing and leading the way playing their drums and singing praises to God. (Ex 15: 2)

King David and all the house of Israel were dancing before God with all their might, with songs and lyres, harps and tambourines , celebrating the Ark of God arriving in Jerusalem. (2 Sam. 6: 1-6)

In Isaiah 40 - A voice cries out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the dessert a highway for our God. Lift up the valley, lower the hills, level the ground, and the glory of God shall be revealed, and ALL people shall see it TOGETHER.

Like the village drummer or the town crier, the nation’s prophet in our text for today cries out for all to hear. The specific context of Isaiah 40 is addressing Israel’s exile from their homeland to a foreign land some 500 years before the birth of Jesus. The prophet sounds out the promise of salvation. In the ancient Hebrew text, ‘salvation’ is not referring to an after-death heavenly reward; that was not part of their theology. Their salvation message was of deliverance from foreign bondage; the salvation message was of freedom and return to the true homeland. The salvation message was reunion from exile in their day.

¹Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Doubleday. 1959.

The prophet speaks: prepare for our God: lift up the valley, lower the hills, level the ground, and all the people shall see the glory of God together.

On occasion, I write a piece called "From the Pulpit" in the *Omaha World Herald*. Weekly three or four pastors submit a two hundred word sermon synopsis. Sometimes it is almost comical how extremely different they each read. But sometimes it is almost unbelievable how similar they sound. One week there were blurbs from a Baptist, a Methodist and a Zen Buddhist. The Baptist preacher quoted from the Christmas story explaining it was poetry, a song of the heart from prophets and shepherds and 'morning stars' singing together. He urged us to listen take in the music as a song in our hearts. The Methodist, that was me, urged us to listen for the rhythm of God's love dwelling within our hearts so that we may live in joy and share peace and joy in the world. The Zen Buddhist spoke of the morning star and meditations which allow us to live awakened to our true selves. Maybe it was just me, but I heard a thread woven between the three. I heard a common rhythm pulsing through them all about embracing and living each day according to the divine heart song/ awakening/ truth within us all.

I was reminded of that newspaper column as the words of Isaiah floated in my ears: Prepare for God- lift up the valley, lower the hills, level the ground, and all the people shall see the glory of God Together.

The prophet cried out into the wilderness to those people who were separated from their home/ separated from their God (so they thought)/ separated from one another. The prophet cries out to all of us who are wandering in the wilderness separated from one another and from our true home. Prepare the way to come home; straighten out the path that has divided you; smooth over the rough places; fill in the pot holes, and all God's people, and all creation will know the glory of God TOGETHER. This text speaks of unity and togetherness of God's people, yet is it not our religions which have most often separated God's people from one another? Is it not our religious languages, rites and rituals, voiced from distinct cultures and contexts which have spawned wilderness and wars between peoples? Could this be yet another layer of meaning to be heard from the prophet Isaiah?

We will reach across our wilderness, our distance from one another, when we raise up those which have been made low...when those who are esteemed higher lower themselves... when we prepare the way for all to be on level ground...then, and only then we will hear the common pulse, and all the people shall see the glory of God together in our midst. God's love is the rhythm of connectedness which raises and lowers and speaks at a level beneath words.

That is another lesson my drums have taught me. As I begin to learn about drums, I experienced a drum circle. A drum circle is people sitting in a circle playing drum. If that sounds easy, it is. There is no music score with any lines or black dots. No one has to know how to read music. Everyone plays their own beats and rhythms on drums of all sorts, along with bells, sticks, rattles and shakers. Some prefer to dance or even howl or sing if you

choose. Now, if everyone randomly does their own thing, 5 or 50 people can be a loud cacophony of disturbing clamor and clashing sounds to set teeth on edge. But in playing a drum circle, we listen to one another as we listen to our own beat within. Someone starts a simple rhythm. Others follow it, echo it, mimic it or find their space to add another layer in the space between. Listening to one another, the pulse of the room rises and falls; it swells in tempo and slows in pace. Listening to one another, we hear ourselves intuitively respond to one another in message and beat. We communicate without words, and on a single thump, the room falls quiet without a word spoken- hearts connected beneath words. The rhythm of God's love resounds through the people from across the room and from around the globe.

The images that Isaiah gives in this text is an impossibility for the people hearing it. "Look at that mountain over there." He points to the distant hill. "Level it off." Think of those huge earthmoving machines that construct our highways today. Think of all the energy it takes to transform our geographical landscape into smooth highways. Remember all the inconvenience road construction brings into our lives. It means we have to slow down sometimes; we have to go around and find a new way sometimes. When the work is done, there is a road that all can travel in safety together.

When we prepare the way of God, we raise, lower, and smooth the way. We connect, listen, and respond finding the Divine Rhythm that joins us. As each of us removes one boulder and fills in one pot hole, as each of us listens for the beat of God's love, as each of us shares and weaves into that beat, a road emerges that all can travel to see the glory of God holding us all TOGETHER.