

BAND TOGETHER - CENTERING Lent

Isaiah 64:1-8a

A Sermon Preached by
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CENTRAL FOCUS:

That the journey to Resurrection and the Beloved Community is done, not just individually, but together, centered in relationship and community

Related to the Lenten theme of Band Together,
of being Centered in God to do so

Pastor Todd Smiedendorf

Our Scripture passage comes from the third section of the large book of the prophet named Isaiah, written over many decades. This third Isaiah reading is from a time when many of the nation of ancient Israel had returned from exile in Babylon, but continued to struggle. They struggled with rebuilding the nation's economy and ensuring its safety and wellbeing. This section is a kind of lament in the understanding of the day; that somehow the suffering is evidence of God's absence and of the people's folly and error.

Listen in your heart for the longing in their lament.

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Isaiah 64:1-8a¹

¹⁻⁷ Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend,
make the mountains shudder at your presence —
As when a forest catches fire,
as when fire makes a pot to boil —
To shock your enemies into facing you,
make the nations shake in their boots!
You did terrible things we never expected,
descended and made the mountains shudder at your presence.
Since before time began
no one has ever imagined,
No ear heard, no eye seen, a God like you
who works for those who wait for him.

¹ Eugene Peterson, translator. The Message: *The Bible in Contemporary Language*^[1] (Navpress Publishing Group, 2002). Old Testament. Accessed 03/14/2019 at <https://www.biblegateway.com/>

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You meet those who happily do what is right,
who keep a good memory of the way you work.

But how angry you've been with us!
We've sinned and kept at it so long!
Is there any hope for us? Can we be saved?
We're all sin-infected, sin-contaminated.
Our best efforts are grease-stained rags.

We dry up like autumn leaves —
sin-dried, we're blown off by the wind.

No one prays to you
or makes the effort to reach out to you
Because you've turned away from us,
left us to stew in our sins.

^{8a} Still, God, you are our Creator.
We're the clay and you're our potter:
All of us are what you made us.

Pastor Todd Smiedendorf

Let's be in a spirit of prayer together.

Spirit,
Moving us ...
Open our Hearts,
Open our Minds
And in the words spoken and words heard
Your truth would move and merge and transform.
May this be so.
— Amen

There's a story about a potter.

Now this potter was learning how to make pottery, to draw forth the shape of the pot from the lump of clay, spinning it on a wheel. That's what you do when you throw pottery. You spin it on a wheel. This is not as easy as it looks on YouTube. One of the most deceptive aspects of throwing pottery sounds so simple: centering. How hard can it be to put the clay on the center? One has to center the clay on the pottery wheel in order for the pot to be formed with integrity, to hold together when it is fired and used. This is not as easy as it sounds.

Now, this aspiring potter of whom I speak got so frustrated with learning to center the clay that she went to the studio intentionally alone so she could work it out without others watching her. She wanted to capture this elusive art of centering. But her struggles continued that day. Eventually, she was so frustrated that she contemplated just chucking the clay off the wheel. In that moment, she looked up at the ceiling exasperated.

And then she saw that the ceiling was already dotted with lumps of clay. *[Laughter.]*

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She, like you, laughed out loud. For then she knew that others has been there, too. Others had struggled mightily with this same art of living. She realized, though by herself, that she was not alone. And she did stay with the learning. She learned to center the clay.

Now you can see this one [*on the right in picture²*] is an example of perhaps not being right on center.

This [*on the left in picture*], being on center.

And the – do call it a pottist? The pottery person? The shaper of this bowl – the potter – the shaper of this bowl was and is University Church member **Nadine Santo Pietro**. Hello Nadine. Thank you for letting me use that story.



That story is a great one for us in terms of looking at our Lenten theme, in terms of connecting with our ancestors of faith, and in terms of hearing today's invitation to spiritual practice.

So many of our human ancestors, including our ancestors of faith, knew this art of pottery. It's an art of living; the pottery is meant to serve the life of the people. They knew that earth in the form of granite stone, once disintegrated and taken by flowing waters to the riverbanks, could be collected as clay. And shaped – often by spinning – into a useful form.

It's a beautiful image, and it is used numerous times in Scripture, to talk about God's relationship to the people. **God is the potter; we are the clay.**

We are the clay.

Yes, we each individually are clay, literally made of Earth. And individuals this last week in Ostrander Hall, in the chapel, and even on the street corner received that blessing, that Ash Wednesday blessing "From dust you have come and to dust you shall return" or, if you prefer, the more cosmic version, "From stardust you have come and to stardust you shall return."

AND ... and ...

WE, the community, are the clay.

WE, the community, are being shaped, are in relationship to God.

Now, because of the invisible currents of Western culture, the currents in which we swim but sometimes don't realize that we are doing so – I'm talking of the currents of individualism and self-determined control – we often hear Scripture primarily as an individual message to you ... and to you ... and to you.

One of the glories of the Enlightenment Age in the West is the legacy of individual rights and freedoms and of self-empowerment because of this. (What a gift. Hallelujah!)

And, ... one of its shadows is the pendulum swing away from community, from the sense of common-wealth, from really perceiving and acting as an inter-dependent community of co-operation

² Picture courtesy of Nadine Santo Pietro, Seattle, WA via private email 3/15/2019

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with all of humanity and all of Creation. And without that we-ness, that together-ness, that 'gathered in-ness,' we are left with democracy and economics that are merely the cruel competition of individuals and factions: bare-knuckled, short term, tribal, manipulated, self-interested, and without vision of the whole or its future or for the whole. Have you seen that? Yeah. Community awareness, care, and action take second place. They can be in the rhetoric, they can be in the race, but always ultimately [in] second place.

And so, into this cultural legacy, this current, into this time of earth-wide challenge to various systems of life, we come to Lent in 2019 inviting us all to Band Together. We are invited to be counter cultural. To swim upstream. We are invited to uplift again commonwealth, common wellness, and community. Now I know that many of you come to University Church frequently. We could take attendance for many of you by simply looking out here and seeing where you are. Some of you come less frequently. It's all good. When you come, I can tell that some of you even like each other. That's a nice start. That's a good start to community. But there's more, so much more. So no matter your level of involvement here or in other communities, the invitation is given to all of us to deepen – to deepen our intention of community, to deepen our ability, our capacity, our intention of Banding Together. So, you are encouraged this season of Lent – as you practice (it's also in the bulletin) – to create, to join, or to be attentive to a small group you are already in, and to hold this small-group time as an intention for spiritual practice. The being in the group is the practice. The paying attention to the group, to its groupness, its group wellness.

And there will be things we need to do to really Band Together well, to be in those groups in the most life-giving way possible, ways of practicing community that we will name throughout this season of Lent. They'll help us. We're going to call them truth telling, serving, risking, being in solidarity, deepening. You'll have to come every Sunday of Lent in order to hear about this. [*response: Amen.*]

Today, we begin simply with the intention and practice of centering in community. For that practice, we can draw from our story image of the Divine potter and the clay. God is the potter. We are ... [*response: ... the clay*]. – Thank you. – **We together are the clay, our church, our community, all of Creation.** You can just keep the circles expanding. God seeks to shape it all into something of beauty that is – like good pottery – a vessel of Life, the **Beloved Community** Dr. King called it. And we can begin by putting that vision in the center of our hearts, the center of our lives, the center of our attention, our budgets, our values and our goals. That would be counter-cultural, especially for Protestants. We went for the individual thing hook, line, and sinker. Now is our time, again, to wake up.

God is indeed the potter, yet somehow, in a world of free will, we will have to co-operate and co-create with the hands of God. Doesn't that sound lovely? The Hands of God. We will have to let Spirit put pressure on us, shape us, stretch us, fire us, transform us into forms we did not imagine. Our preparation to receive that shaping will be those practices we name each week.

And we can expect like Nadine, like all new potters, that community as clay and shaping that clay will have its frustrations, especially in this time.

That is to say, the level of community practice and co-operation that's needed to sustain us, to transform us and our human systems is deep, is deep. At that depth, like the earth's depths, there is

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often heat and pressure. Count on it. So we need a deep enough centering in God and in the vision of God's Beloved Community to see it – to see it *and* to see it through.

One of my heroes is Martin Luther King. He was fond of naming our destination, our journey as one towards *the Beloved Community*. The irony that I am learning is that my very making of Dr. King a hero actually risks missing the truth that he knew, that it takes so much more than one person. Charismatic and talented as that person might be it takes a movement, a community of communities, an intention and energy shaped *and* shared over time.

How many of you know who JoAnn Robinson is? – JoAnn Robinson from Montgomery, Alabama. ... I saw one hand; that's pretty good.

Some 65 years ago, she was president of the Women's Political Council [WPC] in Montgomery. She was also a professor of English at Alabama State University and a member of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where 26 year old Dr. King was called as a young pastor. The Women's Political Council [WPC] was founded a few years earlier – this was the mid '50s – this was founded in 1949 by Mary Fair Burks, another professor of English at Alabama State, after her experience of police harassment. And the pastor previous to Dr. King had inspired her to start the WPC.

And it was the Women's Political Council [WPC] and JoAnn Robinson, president at the time, who were the instigators of the famous Montgomery bus boycott. Dr. King was hesitant. He had to think about it, but eventually agreed. And agreed to lead the group that supported the boycott, in part because he was nominated by being the new guy. *[Laughter]* I should be very careful. *[Laughter]* ... Being the new guy because he hadn't developed any rivalries and bad blood with anybody in town. It was a political choice. Dr. King needed JoAnn Robinson and the Women's Political Council to push him, to nudge him, to apply his great talents in this role.

I could bring up the names of many people instrumental to making that boycott happen, to making all sorts of movements happen, people known and unknown. Dr. King knew this. Indeed, he said during that boycott,

“We are a chain. We are linked together, and *I* cannot be what I ought to be unless *you* are what *you* ought to be.”³

And so we begin this Lenten Season to Band Together – we invite a centering in and a commitment to community. This wisdom is known among many traditions. Community makes a difference. It is how we are shaped and formed. The great Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh did a calligraphy. It simply said [in English]:

THE NEXT BUDDHA WILL BE A SANGHA.

A “Sangha” is a name for a Buddhist community. That is like saying the next Coming of Christ will be a church, not the Church as we have known it, but it will be community. A community will be the way Christ comes again. Indeed, maybe it is already so, waiting for us to center ourselves in this way and then deepen our way of being community. ***For just as the Clay must be centered on the potter's wheel for that pottery to maintain its integrity to hold life, so we must be centered in community, in God's Vision for the Beloved Community.***

(First Baptist Church, Montgomery January 30, 1956)³

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So what will it take? How will we get, how will we *ever* get to Easter Sunday? With the stories that you hold, the stories that you live, the stories that you read about, *how* will we ever, *ever* get to Easter Sunday, this time, this year, in this world as it is. The invitation today is to band together, to center ourselves in community and in our ability to be *in* community, to let God's hands get put right on us, those hands baptized in the waters shaping us.

Will you allow yourself to be shaped? To step in to be seen and to participate in community?
May this be our blessed question today.

- Amen

UCUCC: TS

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew 03/14/2019 from <https://universityucc.org/sermons> then to "More Podcasts" and SoundCloud as needed.