



REBUILDING ANCIENT RUINS

Lenten Reflections on the Church as Neighbor

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*If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. – Isaiah 58: 9b-12*

Lent has long been my most beloved liturgical season with its focus on self-awareness, spiritual discipline, and obedience unto the Cross. In these 40 days we walk alongside Christ on his journey to Jerusalem and ultimately to Golgotha. And we walk as one of the disciples, curious, cautious, afraid, and yet hopeful for all that God has promised in Jesus. We reflect on what God has called us to in our own lives, and we seek to set down what is excessive in order to focus on what is essential, namely our faith in Jesus.

Over the years, as I've worked with churches and communities as a community connector and organizer, I've also been struck by the profound neighbor and community focus of this seemingly interior season. The lectionary readings in Lent are full of the call to examine our relationship not only to God, but to our neighbor and our community. The Prophet Joel calls us to “gather the people” and to “sanctify the congregation” in the midst of great national trouble. Paul writes to Timothy about his “sincere faith” that lived first in his grandmother and his mother. And the Prophet Isaiah, calls on the people of Israel to turn away from self-indulgence and avarice, and to return to the love of God rooted in community support and mutuality.





Isaiah proclaims that when we remove the yoke of selfishness and greed, and the isolation that comes with unchecked self-interest, then we will see our ancient ruins rebuilt. The past three years have been uniquely ruinous, as we've navigated the crisis of a global pandemic, the righteous disruption of calls for justice and equity, the deepening wound of isolation, and the ongoing narrative of church decline. And many of our neighborhoods, the communities where we live and worship, have been fundamentally transformed through economic hardship, gentrification, conflict, and social upheaval. It is not a stretch to say that we are standing in the midst of some unique ruins.

And yet, in this season of Lent, we are reminded that the God we know in Jesus, breathes new life into spaces and places of ruin. We know that when we turn to one another, in faith and genuine relationship, we are sure to encounter Christ in one another. And when we remain faithful to what is essential, when we live in the freedom we have been granted in Jesus, then our ancient ruins will be rebuilt, not as they once were, but as God has promised they will be.

As people of the Cross, as faith communities rooted in place, we have an important role to play in the wellness, development, and flourishing of the neighborhoods and communities where God has gathered us. This Lent, I invite you to reflect not only on your own spiritual wellness and relationship with Jesus, but on the relationship we have with Christ *as community* in the particularity of place. God is breathing new life into our ancient ruins – the ruins of our institutions, our churches, our politics and civic structures, and into the very communities where we live. How are we being called to participate in the rebuilding of the ancient ruins in the places where we gather to worship? How are we being invited to proclaim God's repairing, restoring, and rebuilding presence in the places where we live?

May this Lenten season be a time of setting down what is excessive and isolating and picking up what is essential and connecting. And may we be bearers of Good News in the communities and neighborhoods where God has called us to be. Amen.

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