

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
August 21, 2016

**“Well Schooled the IU Way”**

**“... you shall take delight in the Lord ... and  
ride upon the heights of the earth.”**

Isaiah 58:14a

**Prelude**

It is hard to imagine,  
but our summer schedule is fading;  
soon we resume weekly patterns  
that more typically define our lives  
here at Plymouth.

I am hesitant to employ the term “normal,”  
for normal implies a consistency of manner  
that we rarely meet. We are more accustomed  
to invoking “new normal” language,  
which often doesn’t last long.

This is why, for some of us at least,  
familiar rhythms are appreciated.

In the rhythms of worship, we are invited  
to find rest and expect surprise.

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This summer I’ve opted to focus upon scripture  
passages from various Old Testament prophets.  
I’ve been in/out without much consistency -  
so just to remind -  
over some of these weeks we heard about  
Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, to name just a few.

For the very first Christians,  
devotion to scripture was being well versed in  
the **“law of Moses, and the prophets,  
and the psalms”** (see Luke 24:44).

They drilled deep into this literature,  
to understand, to comprehend,  
to have their minds “opened” to the  
revelation of God in Jesus Christ.  
And we are wise when, in our time,  
in our circumstances, we avail ourselves  
of the treasure stored in this literature  
for the formation and practice of faith.

I feel a need to clarify somewhat here,  
just to make sure our terms are defined  
and well understood. As a young preacher,  
I recall having delivered a very passionate sermon  
on the prophetic grounding and basis  
of our Christian life; and after the sermon,  
one of the congregants, a leader within church,  
responded by saying,

**“It took me a while to get the gist of what  
you’re saying. I thought you were talking about  
how important profits are to the church.”**

His mind was alive, processing visions of  
gross profits,  
net profits,  
profit margins,  
or deficits and the peril, the suffering  
that occurs for lack of profits.

We find prophets in scripture,  
on street corners,  
sometimes in churches,  
wherever they are needed to call  
attention to the word/will of God,  
and God’s claim upon our world.  
We do not find prophets  
on spreadsheets and bank statements.  
Prophets are flesh and blood personalities;  
often odd and eccentric and tormented,  
for they embody divine pathos;  
they are not figures scribbled in ink

on paper registering cash flow.  
This distinction must be clear.

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This morning we heard a reading from the book of Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah is the largest body of prophetic writing in our Bible, some 66 chapters. And scholars detect material composed by different hands in different periods, such that they speak of first Isaiah, 2nd Isaiah, and some, even a third Isaiah, stretching over two or more centuries.

The first Isaiah was active in the 8th century BCE (circa 740, the year King Uzziah died). This Isaiah was of such stature that he apparently gave rise to a school of sorts, a community dedicated to preserving and advancing his thought.

We might call this school  
the original IU.

Isaiah University.

The book we have in our Old Testament includes material, is not only from the founder, but from others who were well schooled the IU way.

A week ago I happened to be engaged in a retreat at the Green Lake Conference Center. My assignment was to be a leader of daily Bible study, and we spent a period each day working through selected passages from Acts of the Apostles. In preparing my assignment, I was reminded of how well versed and astute our New Testament writers were in the writings of the Old Testament. What dawned on me this morning was the number of IU grads – Isaiah University – who contributed to our New Testament.

I figure Zechariah, father was John the Baptist, was a student of IU, for he recited Isaiah when he said God was acting to **“give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace”** (Isaiah 9:2).

Simeon, in beholding the infant Jesus, showed himself to be well school the IU way when he said: **“My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles”** (Luke 2:30-31).

John the Baptist shows clear evidence of having received an IU education: John was “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord ...” (Isaiah 40:3-5).

And Jesus, too, carried an IU diploma. First sermon Jesus ever preached (which we have in scripture) was from Isaiah 61:1- **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners...”** (Luke 4:18-19).

And when Jesus created a stir in temple, turning tables and such, he was being prompted by a passage from Isaiah: **“... my house shall be called a house of prayers for all peoples”** (Isaiah 56:7; see Mark 11:17).

The list of IU alums goes on. Isaiah is featured in the preaching of **Stephen** in the 7th chapter of Acts;

**“Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool”**

(Acts 7:49; Is. 66:1-2);

the **Ethiopian eunuch** reading Isaiah 53  
when he picked up Philip hitchhiking  
on the Gaza Road (see Acts 8:32-33);  
even **Paul and Barnabus** give evidence  
of an IU education,  
preaching from Isaiah while  
at Perga in Pamphylia  
on their first missionary journey  
(see Acts 13:47; Isaiah 49:6).

They were well versed,  
understanding that God  
was at work with intent to  
**“bring salvation  
to the ends of the earth.”**

If you get to the very end of the book  
of Acts, who do you find quoted  
but Isaiah the prophet, which indicates  
the author (Luke) was likely also  
an IU grad.

At the very least, the author was  
well schooled the IU way.

I don't know what colors you wear,  
what team you cheer,  
where fond memories of days long ago reside;  
what alma mater you cherish;  
but I do know we all owe it to ourselves  
to be well schooled the IU way;  
a degree IU, Isaiah's school,  
has much to impart that our  
education be complete  
as children of God.

Without some sort of IU certification,  
we will forever fall short in our quest to  
be followers of Jesus.

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Our reading this morning from Isaiah 58 offers insight into two IU educational priorities. The first is a social obligation to feed the hungry and help the afflicted.

Isaiah is quite clear: there is merit and blessing in helping those who are vulnerable and weak; those who so often are overlooked and cast aside. In Isaiah's classroom the instruction is offered: spirituality is tied and wedded to social ethics.

Light shines, hope is restored,  
when justice is maintained,  
not for some folk, but for all folk.  
When the hungry are fed instead of faulted;  
when the afflicted are recipients  
    of our understanding  
    rather than targets of judgment that blame;  
it is amazing what good comes about.

When this connection of prayer and practice,  
    faith and works,  
is maintained; when we are committed to  
working together for the good of all,  
God is very much present,  
leading and guiding and helping us help  
others, such that the world, our community,  
is transformed, enhanced.

In his monumental work on the Prophets,  
Joshua Abraham Heschel makes a fascinating  
comment about the Hebrews in our Old Testament.

**“The striking surprise is that prophets of Israel were tolerated at all by their people. To the patriots, they seemed pernicious; to the pious multitude, blasphemous; to the people in authority, seditious.”**

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An IU education is not complete without understanding that we all need a day off once a week. We all need Sabbath in order to rest, to find ourselves restored. We get into huge trouble when we trample what was designed for our health, or when we seek first what is best for us

at the expense of others;  
this is a huge transgression so many commit, a glaring omission of those who have avoided an IU education, a failure to yield; Sabbath is a protection, a defense from losing ourselves in life, such that we become so self consumed that we neglect the people that matter most.

When Jesus said,  
**“What shall it profit to gain the world, but lose your soul,”** he was showing his IU pedigree (see Mark 8:36).

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The lesson plan from the IU school this morning challenges each of us to look at the world and determine how we might best be involved in its repair.

Verse 12 is key to the hope an IU education imparts:

**“you shall be called repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.”**

There is considerable ruin in the world:

war, poverty, violence in doses that overwhelm  
and paralyze.

Isaiah was not unfamiliar with  
such circumstances.

Isaiah can rant about ruin with  
the best of the prophets.

But what distinguishes an IU education from most  
others in our biblical literature is the emphasis  
upon empowerment and engagement that is expected.

God is working with us, through us, for us.  
God is committed to birthing us,  
and through our working together,  
we will find delight, and be taken  
to heights we cannot ascend on our own.

So, to find what is so elusive in our lives:  
peace, joy, contentment, schooling in the  
IU way offers guidance.

Find a breach, roll up your sleeves,  
work to repair;  
find a ruin, take on a project,  
and restore.

You will be blessed.  
You will be a blessing for others.

Rather than bemoan the  
sad and sorry state of the world,  
the ruins that keep us anxious and troubled,  
Ponder instead the breaches where  
we might spell relief;  
the brokenness we might help heal;  
the song we might sing,  
to restore hope and confidence.

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I close with these to brief quotes,  
the first from Winston Churchill  
on the significance of being historically informed.

**“The longer you can look back,  
the farther you can look forward.”**

The second is from Garrison Keillor,  
reflecting his own IU schooling:

**“We survive by virtue of people extending  
themselves, welcoming the young, showing  
sympathy for the suffering, taking pleasure  
in each other’s good fortune. We are here  
for a brief time. We would like our stay to  
mean something. Do the right thing.  
Travel light. Be sweet.”**

(Recalling the America I Miss,  
JG, Sat. Aug. 20, p. 9a)

May we all strive to be so well versed  
in the life, spirit, breath of the prophets,  
who speak that we might have life,  
and have it abundantly; that we might  
take delight ...and ride upon the heights  
of the earth ... all of us ... each and  
every one.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*