

First Reading: Isaiah 30.8-15, 18

⁸Go now, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it on a scroll,
so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

⁹For they are a rebellious people, faithless children,
children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord;

¹⁰who say to the seers, “Do not see,”

and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth
things; prophesy illusions;

¹¹leave the way; turn aside from the path; let us hear no more about the Holy
One of Israel.”

¹²Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel: Because you reject this word and
put your trust in oppression and deceit and rely on them,

¹³therefore this iniquity shall become for you like a break in a high wall, bulging
out and about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant;

¹⁴its breaking is like that of a potter’s vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that
among its fragments not a sherd is found for taking fire from the hearth or
dipping water out of the cistern.

¹⁵For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel:

In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your
strength.

¹⁸Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to
show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who
wait for him.

Psalm 107.1-2, 10-16

¹Give thanks to the LORD, for the LORD is good, for God's mercy endures forever.

²Let the redeemed of the Lord proclaim that God redeemed them from the hand of the foe...

¹⁰ Some dwelt in darkness and gloom, prisoners in misery and irons;

¹¹because they rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High.

¹²So you humbled their hearts with hard labor; they stumbled, and there was none to help.

¹³Then in their trouble they cried to the Lord, and you delivered them from their distress.

¹⁴You led them out of darkness and gloom, and broke their bonds asunder.

¹⁵Let them give thanks to you, Lord, for your steadfast love and your wonderful works for all people.

¹⁶For you shatter the doors of bronze and break the iron bars in two.

Second Reading: Acts 14:25-28

²⁵When [Paul and Barnabas] had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. ²⁶From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed. ²⁷When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. ²⁸And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.

The Holy Gospel according to Mark. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

¹It was two days before the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, ²for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

³While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. ⁶But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me. ⁸She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

The Gospel of our Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Beloved hearers of God's Word: grace and peace to you from God our Creator, from Jesus Christ our Redeemer, and from God the Holy Spirit, living and active within us as we gather in Assembly this weekend. Amen.

Take a minute if you will and think back to a moment when you were broken open. Perhaps a therapist or counselor walked with you as you confronted pain you'd swallowed or dysfunction you'd ignored for decades because you didn't have the ability to confront those demons on your own. A beloved friend courageously said something that needed to be said, and even though it hurt, you and your friendship was stronger and more genuine for the saying. A child showed you a side of yourself you hadn't seen before, and you had to question whether you would receive that wisdom or continue in denial. You know your broken open moments: take a minute and reflect on them, if you will.

I have several, but here's one of mine. I was a scatterbrained teenager who wasn't diagnosed with attention deficit disorder until age 40. As that scatterbrained teenager, I was constantly running behind, missing homework assignments, forgetting tasks I needed to do, distracted by the shiny things that caught my poorly-managed attention for the briefest of instants. In short, I was a hot mess. Good thing I've got all of that addressed these days... My "broken open" moment was a conversation with my dad. I don't remember the date or the reason, all I remember is I'd missed another thing and I was apologizing yet again for having done so. Dad said, "you know, sometimes I wish you'd say 'I'm sorry' a whole lot less and mean it a whole lot more."

Yeah. That's being broken open. It's not comfortable, even if it's true. It's not nice, even if it's on the mark. It's a word that needs to be said, but won't land easy on the ears that need to hear it. In his lectures on the book of Romans, Martin Luther described sin as "being curved in upon ourselves," a phrase that was first coined by Augustine of Hippo. Luther wrote,

"...our nature is so curved in upon itself at its deepest levels that [we] not only bend the best gifts of God toward [ourselves] in order to enjoy them..., and 'use' God in order to obtain them, but [we do] not even know that, in this wicked, twisted, crooked way, [we seek] everything, including God, only for [ourselves]."¹



"Homo Incurvatus" by Annette Zappe
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We are *homo incurvatus in se*: we are a people turned in upon ourselves. Even our best, holiest, and most righteous impulses can be twisted and turned to serve ourselves. They become the inspiration for the words of the rebellious children in our reading from the prophet Isaiah:

"Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things; prophesy illusions; leave the way; turn aside from the path; let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."

That's how you get words that land on you like a failed retaining wall. That's how you hear truth that breaks you open like a ruthlessly smashed pot. That's how you wind up broken to pieces, wondering how you became Humpty Dumpty in a real-life nursery rhyme, waiting for someone to please come and help put you back together again.

¹ Luther, Martin. LW 25: Lectures on Romans, p. 159

It's hard enough to suffer through being broken open as an individual, but we've come here this weekend to consider how the church is being broken open as well. Yes, the church can indeed become an institution that is curved in upon itself. If you don't believe me, I suggest you volunteer to serve on the Church Council or any of the committees of your congregation this fall. Your nominating committee will gush with thanksgiving and you will be quickly educated. Here are some of the phrases you'll learn:

- "We tried that — once. It didn't go very well."
- "The synod says we have to do this, but I don't like it."
- "I don't care what the synod says — in this church we won't do that."
- And everyone's favorite six-word church phrase: "WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT THAT WAY."

You as individuals didn't have any difficulty identifying a moment in your life when you'd been broken open. Look around you. This assembly is filled with people just like you. People who've struggled with new ideas about God and faith and church. People who live in communities where beloved memories of generations past are the shackles that *homo incurvatus* uses to hold the future hostage in the present. People who are afraid that the transformation of the world around us is a sign that the church is failing, that we have failed the church, or even worse, failed the Lord and Savior of the church.

What if, in reality, all that's happened is that the world has changed? What if the church is being broken open — invited into faithful change that meets the world where it is and asks, “Where do you think God is in all of this?”

We are *homo incurvatus aperientur*: people curved in on ourselves being broken open. It is not comfortable, nor is it easy. Much of what was once set in stone may be cracked open like vegetation cracks open concrete.



“Thrive” by Daniel Popper
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But there can be abundance in being broken open. There can be new growth springing forth in surprising places. There can be a release from outdated expectations, and the freedom to follow and serve God and each other in ways that make sense for this time, this age. There can be new wine in new wineskins that bless our congregations and the communities in which we live with faithfulness and love. There can be new leaders stepping forward as God calls them, supported and strengthened by the graciously offered wisdom of those who've gone before. There can be a deep love for the history of our churches, a celebration of all that has been accompanied by the drive to move with God toward what can be.

We have used the imagery of *kintsugi* pottery as we've been planning this Assembly, and I have to admit I have come to appreciate this art form as I've learned about it. The prophet Isaiah gives the image of the



potter's vessel smashed to pieces: *kintsugi* can be the image of God's grace mending what is broken open, bringing new life to what appears to be beyond repair. We are a people broken open and made holy by God — vessels whom God has brought back to life again and again, each time more beautiful for the mending and stronger for having lived through the process of being broken open. Listen again as the prophet reminds us that God will be with us in these days of being broken open:

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.

Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore [God] will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for [the Lord].

We who are *homo incurvatus aperientur*, a people being broken open, look to you, O God. We return and rest in you. We seek the quietness and trust you promise will strengthen us. We seek your mercy and pray for your resurrection. Break us open, that we might hear the truth we need to hear. Mend us, that we may live and serve you in new life and joy, now and always. Amen.