



**First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
*Creating Community, Welcoming All***

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sermon Rev. David Jones Sunday, February 5, 2023 Do Not Hide Yourself

When we reflect on scripture, we might concentrate on the content of it, the text, the words themselves and our best guess at their meaning, or we might choose to concentrate instead on the context of the words—on who was likely writing them, their status in society, what events were unfolding in their lifetime, what geographic or environmental factors might be relevant. We might then engage in some speculation, and wonder about the psychology of the author and audience: are they dealing with trauma or fear, are they grief stricken or filled with confidence? We might imagine what other scriptures are being referenced or are in the backdrop, that the author and audience may have in mind when this was recorded or first read. There are endless ways to engage with the scriptures.

But something we can easily forget and overlook, is how the scripture, a given passage, will engage with *us*, in what state it will find us. If the scripture had a mind like ours, and eyes like we do, and it looked secretly up at us from its vantage on the page, what would it encounter? Who would it see? What is *our* context as readers? What emotions are we dealing with, are we fearful or hopeful, are we connected to a community, do we have a role and a voice in it, or are we isolated, or ignored? Are we in love, are we a child, are we a grandparent at the moment we are reading it?

This passage from Isaiah is one of my favorites, and more than once, I have encountered this passage and been moved by its call to do justice, to feed the hungry and to house the homeless. The passage is ruthless in saying everything else we might do—worship, charity, everything we pray for—it is all hypocritical, it is all hollow—sinful, ultimately—when we have not learned to share our bread, and when we have not learned to bring the homeless in from this bitter cold, into our houses; this passage poses (and answers) the question, what must God think of us when weather like we have had these past few days, which can take the life of some of God's children, and God hears us say 'how awful, how sad', and then watches as the next winter comes, that will be just as cold with just as many people who are homeless.

I am grateful for, even if I do not live up to it, a passage like this that is so blunt with us, about how we sin. This passage is an indictment of the selfishness and hypocrisy that exists and prevails among even we who pray and say all the right things. This is how I've always read this passage, as an ethical challenge we have not yet risen to meet.

But this is the first time this provocative passage, these words, have looked up from the page and found me, and encountered me, as a father. And I heard the lists of God's chosen fasts, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless, in an entirely new way. You see, those who are going hungry, those who do not have shelter, they have worked hard in this life, they have done their best, they have developed skills and cared for others, they've told jokes, they've accomplished things, they've *lived*. And they've suffered pains and losses, they deal with trauma and anxiety, they have been wronged, they've been blessed, they've been charitable, they've received charity. They have had lives full of story and meaning and purpose, and they have seen as many triumphs and failures as anyone who is not hungry, as anyone who is not homeless. There is no substantive difference between a hungry person working two or three jobs, or a hungry person whose job was offshored, who lost their pension, no difference between a hungry person whose passion and talent were undervalued or overlooked because of their identity or sexuality—there is no difference, that is, between the vast majority of people

in this country who experience hunger—and those who do not share that experience. And because of this, there is an ethical requirement to intervene into this scandal of hunger and homelessness in a rich country, to end suffering that cannot ever be justified before God.

But there *is* a big difference, a substantive difference, between all of these adults, hungry or not, and my son Hugo. Hugo has not worked a day in his life. He doesn't make any effort around the house. He isn't rude exactly, since he doesn't have any concept of manners, but he is certainly inconsiderate, he doesn't excuse himself when he burps, he doesn't cover his mouth when he sneezes. My son just coasts on his good looks, and expects his mother and father to do literally everything for him. When he makes a mess, he doesn't clean it up. And he is also very small, and very weak, he can't help unload the groceries or move things into storage. He doesn't help with rent. He is not self-reliant in any way. He is actually a good listener, he hears all kinds of sounds, and he loves to look around and see and try to touch new things; but he is not a good friend. If you are dealing with a problem in your life, if you're feeling anxious about something or worried, don't talk to Hugo about it, he doesn't care one bit.

But of course, he is a baby. He doesn't have the ability to do any of these things. But a funny thing is happening to Caity and I: this strange, self-absorbed, awfully cute baby is giving us more joy and more happiness and more sense of meaning and purpose than we could have ever imagined. We don't feed him because we have an ethical imperative to do so. I mean, we obviously do have that imperative, but we don't wake up to his fussing, and think, well, we have a duty to feed him, God said so! No, we get up and go to him because we want to. We love to. We do it for *ourselves*, not for him. Because he is our own flesh and blood, and to take care of our son is to take care of ourselves. To celebrate him with unearned, unmerited affection and warmth, to make him an equal and full member of our household despite his limitations, is to celebrate ourselves with affection and warmth, it is to enlarge our household. It is in *our* interest to make him kin, to enter into a relationship in this deep way, is to magnify our own life. We happen to be doing this with our son, but you can do this with a friend, a neighbor, another family member.

And Hugo grows older, and does develop lots of different interests and talents, and he has lived lots of life, when he has built relationships with others, when he has tried hard at something and succeeded and failed—because we all do both everyday, we succeed and we fail, we earn things we don't end up getting and we get things we never earned, that's life under the sun; through all this, as long as we are able, we will be feeding him and housing him just the same. We will be helping him and attending to him as long as we can, as long as we get to.

He could even make that hard on us one day, by actually being selfish, not just by being a baby. He could make bad choices, he could hurt others, and maybe it will be because of mistakes I make or Caity makes, but much more likely, it will just be out of our control. But I hope, no matter what, we will try and I hope we will succeed at loving him more often than not, not because it's the right thing to do, not for ethical reasons, not because God says so, but because having love for him in our lives, even if he can't receive it, even if we can't physically reach him—painful as that would be—having love for him under whatever circumstances, in whatever way, will be the same as having love for ourselves. Love for kin, is love for yourself.

None of us can control our children and we cannot control the people in our communities. None of us can protect each other at all times or in all situations. And frankly, none of us is in a position to judge any child, yours or someone else's, or any person. But the fast that God chooses can be the one that we choose. Not the fast of high ethics, not the fast even of justice, though those things as a result. Rather, the fast that God chooses is to make all people God's children; the fast that we can choose is to make all people our kin.

The way this passage finds me now, is as grace, is as incredible hope. What our son gives to Caity and I, all people *can* give to us. We aren't restricted by God to only feed and clothe and house Hugo; God says "don't hide from anyone," don't hide ourselves from anyone in this world. There are no bounds on kinship. When we are all as siblings, when we are as brothers and sisters, doing justice will not be a rigorous ethical demand that we have to strain for, strive to reach desperately in amid the cold

winter; it will be like the warm sound of your own flesh and blood, like the sound of a dear friend, and we will act decisively and without fear in *their* interest because it will be so obviously in our *own* interest. Enriching their life will be so clearly enriching our own life.

When it is like this, our own light—God’s light in each of us—as Isaiah promises, will break forth like the dawn. If we remove the yoke from among us, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil—if we do not hide ourselves from our kin and no longer hesitate and fail to offer our food and satisfy the needs of all who are afflicted—then our light will rise even in the darkness and even our gloom will be like the noonday.

Alleluia and amen.