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*Texts: Genesis 31: 44-49; Isaiah 21: 6-8*  
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Live at the Mizpah Café

Since the beginning of Advent, we've been circling around the dreams of human flourishing that are found throughout the pages of Scripture, but that are given special prominence in the weeks leading up to the birth of Christ. These are contagious, optimistic, and hopeful visions that serve as a corrective toward the gloomy dystopias that have been fueling our public imagination for so long now. To the vision of privatized and isolated individuals, the prophets and their descendants present a picture of cohesive social relationships and joyful interdependence. To the vision of a bestial and savage humanity, held in check by a thin veneer of civilization, Isaiah and his offspring counter with a vision of humanity as capable of altruism and idealism, even when the chips are down. To the vision of a world doomed to destruction and warfare, the prophets and their restless children counter with a vision of the world as beloved, as graced, as worthy of our care, worthy of the hard work required to wean ourselves off of weaponry and conflict. To the vision of a world of disrespect, of misogyny, of sexual humiliation and conquest, the prophets and their restless children offer a vision of decency, of humility, and of emotional connection. It's not that all those restless children are Pollyannaish, refusing to countenance the hard truths of the world. Rather, it's that they've seen it all too well, and know that there are better, more ennobling traits of the world and of human beings.

I've been highlighting those themes because the season invited it. But I've also been focused upon them because we desperately need visions of the best of who we can be just now. We need to tell the stories not only of the prophets and the birth of Jesus, but of those like William James, Dorothy Day, Malala Yousafzai, and Joe Ehrmann. I'm not ready to leave those themes behind just yet, because they've all been building toward some of the thoughts I'd like to share with you today.

What I'd like to do first is to return us to San Francisco in 1906, when the great earthquake shook that city to its core. And I'd like to share the story of one more person who lived through the aftermath of that event. She was a beautician and masseuse by training, and she wound up creating something that might help us to understand something of what's happened among us, here in Old Lyme, over the past year. Her name is Anna Holshauser, and her improvised response to a crisis may well provide clues about what we've come through recently, but also where we as a community might be heading in this new year.

Here's what happened to Anna Holshauser.<sup>1</sup> On the morning of April 6, 1906, she was thrown out of her bed by the shaking. It was an era when one didn't simply throw on clothes to go outside, and so, amazingly, she took the time to get herself fully put together, doing her hair, hurriedly applying makeup, and then finally descending the hundred or so stairs between her apartment and the city street. Her building was standing

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<sup>1</sup> Holshauser's story is told in Rebecca Solnit's book *A Paradise Built in Hell* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), pgs. 13-17.

but unstable, and her place of business was destroyed. And so, together with a friend, she salvaged just a few things and camped out in Union Square. A short time later, fires began to spread throughout the city, and soldiers moved them along. And so Holshauer, along with thousands of others, migrated to Golden Gate Park, where they constructed makeshift camps. On the first night, Holshauer and her friend simply put down a quilt, and sat shivering from the cold, watching the city burn. By the third day, Holshauer had acquired some blankets, sheets, and carpets, which she stitched together to create a makeshift shelter that accommodated twenty-two people, thirteen of which were children. Starting with one tin can from which to drink, and one pie plate from which to eat, Holshauer began to feed the people in her care with whatever provisions she could find. She acquired an outdoor stove, since stoves were being moved out of buildings all over the city. Then she got funds to buy eating utensils from across the bay. And her kitchen began to grow, so that soon, she was feeding two to three hundred people every day.

At a certain point, an aid crew from Nevada was stationed beside Anna Holshauer's kitchen tent, and wagonloads of goods needed for the relief effort began to arrive at the back of the kitchen, and so the kitchen became not only a place to get food, but a place to find other necessities as well. Soon, the Nevada crew gave the tent a name, in honor of a saloon they all gathered in back home. They called it: "The Mizpah Café."

It's a powerfully significant name, with a rich and varied history. It's a word found in the very first book of the Bible, Genesis, during a long and complicated dispute that one of the biblical patriarchs, Jacob, is having with his father-in-law, Laban. In order to settle the dispute, they build a cairn of stones, a kind of pillar, and they name it Mizpah, as a reminder of the peace that they had established, and of the covenant that bound them together. When they part, they use words that have become part of a tradition of prayer in Hebrew and Christian contexts. The words are these: "The Lord watch between you and me while we are absent from one another." In the original story, those words have to do with keeping rival parties from harming each other, but the meaning of those words has shifted and grown over the centuries. Mizpah is now a word that means "an emotional bond between those who are separated (either physically or by death)." But it also came to have the connotation of the Old Testament watchtower, which is often referenced in the prophetic literature, especially Isaiah. It was the place where people would meet during great emergencies. The watchtower was also symbolic of a sanctuary, a place of hopeful anticipation.<sup>2</sup>

The Mizpah Cafe was certainly all of those things for the three months that it functioned after the San Francisco earthquake. It became a place where emotional bonds could be nurtured, especially given the separations that the disaster had unleashed. It became a place of gathering. But it also became a place of hopeful anticipation, where new possibilities, new loves, and new dreams were all nourished. Imagine it: strangers became friends, goods were shared freely, people improvised new roles for themselves, old divides fell away, and people felt important and purposeful as they attended to the needs around them.<sup>3</sup> The realities they faced and contended with became far less grim as a result of being shared. In other words, it was a scene of biblical proportions, in the best sense of that word, "biblical."

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<sup>2</sup> See Solnit, pg. 17, for the additional references to "Mizpah."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg. 17.

The scene of the Mizpah Café is powerfully instructive, because I think we've all known moments like that – not often and not always, but we've known them. Moments when life is illuminated, where new social possibilities emerge, where meaning and purpose are discovered, and where true joy is found, even under difficult or painful circumstances. It's what the biblical writers refer to when they speak of "eternity." The language sounds elevated, but the experience is more familiar than you might suspect. It's kids losing themselves as they rehearse and then perform a play or musical, or as they participate on a sports team, discovering that a shared purpose converges with a sense of belonging as they all pursue a common telos or goal. It's parents dedicating themselves to raising kids, and then realizing when it's all over that they were in a sort of blessed state all along. It's those who undergo retirement, as most everyone does, who come to understand what a gift it has been to have meaningful work, or good colleagues, even if the demands were high. It's what can happen on a journey, when ordinary time is suspended, when new friendships come into being, when new understandings and life possibilities are suddenly possible. Most of us, I suspect, have been to the Mizpah Café in our individual lives, with or without an event like an earthquake as a backdrop. Sometimes we don't even know it until it's over.

But the Mizpah Café has become important to me as a way of understanding what happened around here over the past year. I'm referring, of course, to the sanctuary work that shaped our year together. I confess I haven't always known how to describe the emotional and spiritual landscape of all that happened during the months that Malik and Zahida were with us. Grief and joy were held together, and neither canceled the other out. On the day that Malik and Zahida were released from their long captivity here at the church, I spent the morning preparing the comments that I would share at the press conference. And at a certain point, I simply had to shut the door to my office to sit with the feelings I had. I was relieved that Malik and Zahida were being released, but that wasn't all. The weird, ambiguous truth is that I was powerfully sad that it was all coming to an end. So much goodness had emerged over those months. I can't speak for everyone here, but it felt as though we all found each other as a result of those seven months. It was as though in the prayers that we learned to pray, in the support we offered, in the meals we shared, in the services that we held, through all of it, we, all of us, were given back to each other. Those moments are why I went into ministry. Those moments of shared life and rich communal existence are what I've been searching for ever since I was an adolescent, and probably longer than that. It can't be controlled or predicted or manipulated, but it had happened here, among us, and I have to tell you, I didn't want it to end. I promise you, I did want Malik and Zahida's captivity to end, but not that fleeting, intangible, and precious sense of belonging and purpose that so many of us found in that work. We were alive in the Mizpah Café.

The truth is, we still are. One of the craziest, but also the most telling things that's happened in the months since their release is that Malik and Zahida frequently return to Old Lyme. And we gather as we used to, sitting in the church nursery. We share stories, we eat food, and some among us knit. It's a testimony to the bonds of friendship that were formed during those months spent in captivity. But really, it's a testimony to all of you. You helped to create a space that felt safe, that enveloped them in love and care. You created the Mizpah Café for them, and this church remains a source of strength for them.

But now it's time to do it again, though with a difference. We may be asked to provide physical sanctuary again, and if we were asked, we'd likely do it. But I suspect the terrain may be changing. Ours is the last sanctuary case in the nation to end successfully. There are some forty other individuals and families who have taken sanctuary in places of worship across the country, including two here in Connecticut. So far, none of those individuals or families has been able to emerge from sanctuary with their freedom intact. As far as I can discern, ICE is using a two-fold strategy: first, they are preventing people from entering sanctuary in the first place by using accelerated deportation strategies, or by offering last-minute stays when enough public pressure is exerted. But second, they're simply letting people who are in sanctuary remain there indefinitely, as a means of preventing the movement from gaining traction. If we wish to protect individuals and families who are now profoundly vulnerable, if we wish to create ways in which due process can actually unfold, if we wish to create zones of hospitality and compassion where the Mizpah Café can come into existence, we may have to shift our tactics as well.

That's why we've taken on the case that we have. You've already heard a little about the Torres family, and of how Glenda was suddenly deported this past August. Most of you have heard how painful that separation continues to be, for the children and for Miguel. It's important for you to know that story because it represents the flip side of sanctuary, demonstrating what happens when families don't, or can't, find refuge in a church. As hard as taking sanctuary is, families being torn apart is far worse. Not only that, the risk to Glenda is high. The city to which she was deported in Honduras, San Pedro Sula, has the distinction of being the most violent city in the world outside of a war zone. This past week, Glenda had a gun held to her head and she was robbed of her money and her phone. It's a desperate situation in all sorts of ways, one story among so many others of cruel and inhumane policies enacted against those without legal status.

Here's what we're going to do. The first thing we're working on is to get Glenda into a safe and protected space, so that Miguel, Nathaly and Keneth won't be worried sick about her. We've reached out to the Sisters in Mexico with whom we stayed this past September to see if they might offer temporary refuge. If that doesn't work, we have other options to explore as well. Second, we're going to build a case for something called a Humanitarian Parole. It's an option that's not often exercised, but in certain cases, the State Department grants humanitarian paroles if the situation warrants it. We intend to demonstrate that it does. Working with Glenn Formica, the attorney who is handling Malik and Zahida's case, we'll gather the support of as many of our elected leaders as we can, and we'll build a public campaign to bring Glenda home. But the third part is the most important, at least for now. We have to be a community of love and support for Miguel, for Nathaly, and for Keneth. We have to surround them with our care, so that when the days and nights get long, when it becomes tempting to yield to despair, when it all feels like way too much to bear, they'll know that they'll have a community that will help to bear their burdens.

But if it's anything like what's happened in the past, we'll be changed as well. We'll find each other in new ways as we go about this work. The Mizpah Café will be open, and thriving, among us. We shall become, or continue to be, those who preserve bonds of affection between those who are separated. We shall become, or continue to be, a place of hopeful anticipation, where new possibilities, new loves, and new dreams can

be nurtured. We shall become, or continue to be, a place of gathering where people meet in a time of emergency, not unlike that earthquake. Imagine it with me once more: strangers became friends, goods are shared freely, people improvise new roles for themselves, old divides fall away, and people felt important and purposeful. And the realities we face and contend with become far less grim as a result of being shared. Maybe it's not so hard to imagine after all. Because it's what we've been doing all along.

I conclude with the Mizpah prayer, a prayer for Miguel, Glenda, Nathaly, and Keneth, but really a prayer for each and every one of us making our way through the world: The Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from the other.