

**WESTMINSTER**  
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**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# The Poetry in Us

Dr. Jo Forrest



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In 1590, Edmund Spenser wrote

She bath'd with roses red, and violets blew,  
And all the sweetest flowres, that in the forrest grew.

His turn of phrases to describe a fairey bathing in a fountain stirred an appetite for rhythm and meter and seeped it into the memory of the people.

By the 1700s, it was so oft repeated that the old English style had softened with more lyrical cadence:

The rose is red, the violet's blue,  
The honey's sweet, and so are you.

Next time you receive a shmaltzy Valentine's Day card or hear a silly joke, know that you've been lured into a long history of word play to capture your imagination. Whenever you hear "roses are red, and violets are blue" your mind needs to complete the idea.

The ancient writers of scripture understood our appetite – whether acknowledged or not – for poetry. At a time when an oral tradition was the only way to transmit ideas across a population, the prophets relied upon poetry to speak to a person and unite a people.

The Book of Isaiah's prophecy laces bits of historic narrative with soaring poetry. It is the most oft quoted book within Hebrew liturgies and referenced in our Christian scriptures.

We've placed this poetry into symphonic arrangements, written them on Christmas cards, and taken them so far from their original context that we might as well be talking about a

*fairey* taking a bath when in fact the poetry addresses the devastation of Israel.

We remember the poetry but easily forget the events and people from eight centuries before the time of Christ.

Isaiah writes a generation after the prophet Amos – who Laura Bentley read last week. Amos warned the arrogant, elite class of pending doom if they did not mend their ways to care for all people.

When the good times roll, it's hard to imagine anything other than more of the same.

Amos' warnings proved true. The northern kingdom of Israel began to crumble from within so that outsiders easily invaded and claimed the spoils of their conquests. "Spoils" implying exiling and enslaving people.

Isaiah picks up the difficult task to prophecy to those in the southern region who still think themselves immune. He needs to persuade them that if they cannot live within the covenant of God – loving God and neighbor – they risk their lives.

He speaks during a crisis of leadership. In his first eight chapters, Isaiah names the despair from inept rulers. Isaiah's prophecy pushes them to imagine something different.

*Dear God,*

*The tensions we face today of budgets and racial strife and caring for those in desperate need are far more sophisticated than of ancient days. How can poetry from millennia ago might have any relevance to us? Quiet us so that we can hear your voice. Send*

*your spirit among us so that we too can imagine the possibilities and give of ourselves. Amen.*

Isaiah 9:1-7

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.

<sup>3</sup>You have multiplied exultation;  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.

<sup>4</sup>For the yoke of their burden  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

<sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

<sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders,

and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup>Great will be his authority,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

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Into their destitute existence, Isaiah writes:  
The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;

When faced with darkness, we crave the light to literally keep us alive. Our ability to flick on the lights as the winter nights grow longer shields us from the encroaching darkness, dangerous darkness. During Isaiah's time, the people had no such convenience.

Isaiah promises a great reversal – a light will shine, which could only come from a divine source. The poetry repeats:  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness –  
on them light has shined.

When they begin to see this light, they can imagine a day when they will simply throw the warrior's boots, garments rolled in blood, into kindling for a fire. War will cease. And, that burdensome yoke, a kind of heavy bar that weighs down their

shoulders, will be broken and someone will yank the oppressor's rod to stop the whipping. No more enslavement. Isaiah's poetry calls people to imagine this new possibility.

When the prevailing rulers want nothing more than for them to be stuck within their systems, to imagine is the first step to change. They must learn to see glimmers of light so that they can act. Poetry works this way as well. Once they heard the beauty of his words, they begin to repeat "darkness to light" and let the cadence roll off their tongues. They remembered and began to hope.

Mere words brought them to imagine a new reality. Once they could imagine, then they could work to make it true.

The late Walter Brueggemann broke theological ground in his scholarship describing what he called "the prophetic imagination." The prophet expresses the hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that people no longer remember them.

It takes courage to prophecy against those who control the systems that oppress. In the presence of facts, or what they claim as facts, the rulers will dismiss any words of hope that lead to a different future. So, prophets never speak about hope with science and argument. Their hope comes to us in poetry. You just cannot fight a poem.

Like ray of light, it enters our world from outside of us. Like a light that disrupts darkness, it pierces what we accept as not possible. Maybe our hope is not a fantasy? Then like a poem lyrical quality, hope dwells within our speech. It repeats,

almost like a jingle to get inside of us, to touch that hopeless part of us.<sup>1</sup>

The composer Handel placed this poetry into the grand chorus of *The Messiah*, so often sung in December as we anticipate Jesus' birth. But, if all we do is sequester Isaiah's poetry to concert halls, we lose access to God's word of hope.

For centuries before his birth, Isaiah inspired the people to remember and to trust God's promises. Isaiah asked them to imagine and then to demand more from leaders. When Jesus began his ministry, he recites the poetry from Isaiah...he also describes himself as the light of the world. Isaiah's visionary language points to more than just Jesus, he still speaks to.

One Christmas Eve, several years ago, I told this story. Each year since the one of our annual visitor reminds me of hearing it and usually expresses disappointment that I'd not repeated it. It's a story of how God's word of hope comes in unique ways and at the very same time connects us to others through these ancient verses.

The weekend before Thanksgiving, I stopped by Whole Foods, ostensibly for the week's groceries. Doing errands might feel productive even if they mask my procrastination. I was struggling with Isaiah's prophecy of our messiah appearing as a wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, etc.

Since it was early, only a few checkout lines were opened, and they moved slowly. Trying to make the best of my time, I reached for my phone only to realize I'd left it at home. Now I

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

really became impatient with myself. I couldn't scroll through nor use the Whole Foods app for my additional 10% discount.

(This was before the days of merely waving your hand.)

When I started to unload my groceries, I admitted to the check-out guy I'd forgotten my phone with the app.

He smiled broadly saying, "They call me 'Mr. Wonderful.' I can offer you the price adjustment." This gesture alone made up for the slow pace.

Mr. Wonderful had an infectious smile. He was of a slight build and from the hearing devices that were visible, his unusually shaped ears, and slight speech impediment, I realized he had to work to overcome his hearing impairment. And yet he wanted to talk with me.

As I turned to bag my groceries, he asked, "What book has transformed your life?"

I thought to myself, seriously! This was Whole Foods on a Saturday morning not a university or indie bookstore.

His eye contact told me he'd wait for an honest answer.

I felt a huge risk. I don't wear my collar outside of church.

I try to live my faith, but not broadcast it. So, I surprised myself when I said, "Holy Scripture has and continues to change my life."

He paused before responding, “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.” He smiled, saying that his favorite book is *The Gospel of John* because of its ethereal incarnation.

“But then again,” he said, “I love Moses’ psalm...Psalm 90,” and he paused to see if or how I would respond.

I lobbed back: one of my favorite hymns is “Our God Our Help in Ages Past.”

He hummed the first line of this hymn, which is based on Ps 90, and it was as if we both scored.

Mr. Wonderful laughed then wandered into talking about the prophets, “Who does Jonah think he is, arguing with God?”

Our banter went on while he scanned, and I bagged the groceries with intermittent questions if the cauliflower was organic or conventional.

Once we were done, as he handed me the register tape, and said, “The most profound book of all is the prophecy of Isaiah, ‘unto us a child is born.’” He recited a portion of the poem and his voice seemed to crescendo “and they shall call him Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.”

I was speechless. Not even an hour ago, I wondered if such ancient words still matter. How could I ever doubt God’s ability to light my way? What happens when I stop trying to explain the text and simply let the poetry – the ideas from God – get inside me?

Mr. Wonderful taught me, all over again, why this poetry and why the church matters. Whenever we approach a check-out clerk at Whole Foods or any grocery store we can expect to encounter some version of a Mr. Wonderful, someone who also hopes for a better future, someone who offers a spark of light in our dreary day.

God has this habit of putting people in our lives who may speak to us with a glimmer of hope. God also has a desire for you to one day be a Mr. Wonderful, who will speak on God's behalf.

In this last week of The Joy of Giving campaign, I ask you to pray over the pledge you make to Westminster for 2026, please consider...

Without the church, who advocates for the hungry? Westminster has a kitchen because you have the passion to show up and get your hands into the cupcake batter and make sandwiches to deliver. And you mobilize an entire community to raise money, collect food and feed people when elected officials turn away.

Who will care for the children neglected by the rest of society? Trees adorn our building so you can ensure the children in the care of BAIR Foundation will know that they are not forgotten this Christmas.

Without the church, who will embrace the weary? Because of Westminster, this community of faith welcomes everyone from civic leaders to teachers to health care workers to retirees and stay at home spouses. This community of faith teaches about the power of grace to forgive while it

empowers us to demand justice. Here we remember that what we do matters in the eyes of God and then we hold our ourselves to a higher standard in the workplace and this community.

Without the church, who will baptize God's tender souls into the body of Christ? You promise on behalf of the wider church to teach the faith to these little ones both in- and outside of these walls.

Without the church, who or what will be the spark of light in a world of darkness? As the light grows dim, Westminster's steeple shines brightly as a symbol of the ministry the people of this congregation.





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2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630  
[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)