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The past several years we have heard a lot about the importance of washing our hands. I think we knew the necessity before, but the Center for Disease Control reinforced the idea during Covid. We've heard over and over again to wash our hands for 20 seconds with soap and water. Since it's awkward to use a stopwatch to signal the end of 20 seconds, the CDC offered a list of songs that might help, such as singing "Happy Birthday" twice or one verse of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." One person even wrote new lyrics to this song for handwashing:

Twinkle, twinkle little star. Look how clean my two hands are. Around my wrists and between my thumbs, lace my fingers, I'm almost done. Twinkle, twinkle little star. Look how clean my two hands are!¹

Another person suggested that instead of singing these songs, we could recite:

Psalm 23 each time you wash your hands. There are only 6 verses, so while you may read them off your phone while you wash the first couple of times, I believe that you'll have it memorized by the end of the week... It takes about 20 seconds to sing "Happy Birthday" twice all the

way through, and it will take you just a few seconds longer to recite Psalm 23.²

Just imagine walking into a public restroom and hearing lots of people reciting Psalm 23: "the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want..." Not only will we all have clean hands, but the words might also cleanse our hearts as we recite words about trusting God in dark valleys and about eating at a table with our enemies.

I'm not sure how much the prophet Isaiah knew about the importance of hand washing, but he did suggest that God's people needed to wash up their hearts. He addressed them as a sinful nation, comparing them to the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Those two cities had such a bad reputation for all kinds of behaviors that they eventually collapsed from corruption.

Those listening to Isaiah may have dismissed him, saying, "Oh, things aren't that bad. We're not like those two evil cities." Isaiah then got a bit more personal, talking about how they worshiped, for he said that God no longer liked the offerings they were bringing nor the festivals they were

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celebrating. The prophet even suggested that God didn't want to listen to their prayers anymore. It's almost as though God said, "You're all washed up! You can't continue worshiping while people are suffering! Clean up your act! Get washed up."

Through Isaiah, God suggested a way to get washed up: by caring for the oppressed, the orphans, and the widows—those people often overlooked in the world. Or as *The Message Bible* translates the words:

Learn to do good.
Work for justice.
Help the down-and-out.
Stand up for the homeless.
Go to bat for the defenseless.

Those words echoed in my ears during the Elkhart Homeless Coalition meeting on Thursday. Once a month representatives from organizations and churches gather to discern how to best care for those who don't have homes. Several agencies recently observed that rising costs are making life difficult for people who have not experienced these challenges before. Those who can normally afford rent are now finding their rates increasing beyond

what they can pay. One mental health organization reported that they are seeing more families facing homelessness than in prior years. Another organization has had new families request help with huge utility bills. Since these families never experienced this problem in the past, they didn't know where to turn for help, so the bills continued to increase.

On the other hand, an article in the *South Bend Tribune* reported that the *Wall Street Journal* has singled out Elkhart County as having a vibrant economy. This county has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation and the demand for affordable housing is increasing.³

How can both situations be true? A strong, vibrant economy and the fact that less people can afford to live here?

Isaiah suggested about 2700 years ago that God's people needed to pay attention to those who were often overlooked, to those who couldn't afford to live. I wonder what the prophet might suggest today. Might he wonder what we're doing to help those in need? Might he offer harsh words about

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our worship when people around us are suffering?
How might he suggest we wash up?

I offer two stories of ways the church strives to wash up. One story comes from our Global Mission Partner, who observed someone trying to improve life for those around him:

Just south of Bogotá, lives “Diablito” who is not a prophet, but he does know how to make “sancocho” (a traditional stew)... On Sundays...he cooks very well, especially when feeding many people. And since March of 2021, there have been plenty of people to feed. In...Bogotá, Colombia, many people have been protesting the tax reform and advocating for a basic income...Pots and stew help communities discover new liturgies in the midst of famines. They help foster the memory of communion out of what little we have, like from a “sancocho” bowl. It is in the vast spirituality of the kitchen that we build hope during political hardships, reminding us of our human tenderness while we eat even when we don’t agree.⁴

Another story comes from Church Community Services (in Elkhart), which offers food and many other services to those in need in our local community:

Maria and her husband were both working full-time and making ends meet when the virus hit and the factory where Maria worked shut down, and her husband, who is self-employed as a mechanic, had no work altogether. For many in our community, living paycheck to paycheck is a reality, and any unexpected bill or financial setback can mean financial ruin...

When Maria visited us, she said she is back to work, but her husband is still not getting the business he was accustomed to getting before the pandemic. They needed help with rent and utilities, and we were glad to be able to help... “COVID-19 has put a spotlight on many of the fault lines in our country, including the weaknesses in our system to care for those in need. The pandemic is a great inconvenience for middle and upper-income families, but for those already living on the edge, something like this can be devastating.”⁵

In hearing these stories, the prophet Isaiah might suggest to us today: “Great start. Don’t let the water run dry. May you continue to find more creative ways to wash up and do good.”

¹ Marc Silver, "My Hand-Washing Song: Readers Offer Lyrics For A 20-Second Scrub," www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/03/17/814221111/my-hand-washing-song-readers-offer-lyrics-for-a-20-second-scrub, March 17, 2020.

² Jonathan Williams, "Washing Hands to Psalm 23 in the Midst of a Pandemic," March 18, 2020, www.gospelfamily.org/blog/washing-hands-to-psalm-23-in-the-midst-of-a-pandemic

³ www.southbendtribune.com/story/news/2022/07/28/elkhart-goshen-identified-as-the-nations-top-market-for-housing/65384859007/

⁴ www.globalministries.org/pots-and-stew-in-usme/

⁵ www.churchcommunityservices.org/blog/2020/6/22/covid-19-lost-wages-and-hurting-families