

Impatient for redemption (Isaiah 35:1-10)

Listening to "What's Going On" provides some solace—and some discouragement.

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#)

December 13, 2019

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

When my mother was pregnant with me, she often listened to Motown. Songs from the Supremes, the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, and others were among the first sounds I heard.

I have continued to listen to the same artists throughout my life, and I often turn to their familiar music when I am feeling heartbroken. Lately, I've been feeling heartbroken a lot because of injustices weighing on me in the part of Chicago where I live and work.

One of those familiar songs is Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On," originally released in 1971. It touches on many of the same problems people still face today in neighborhoods like the one where my congregation is located. Even as I find solace in listening to it, I also get discouraged that it looks like so little has changed.

I have a similar feeling when I read the words of Isaiah 35. I become impatient for the redemption of the world. I make God in my own image, wanting God to have the kind of power and control that I wish to exert. I long for a God who *fixes* because I long to fix the problems I see. I want God's vengeance and terrible recompense to look like the vengeance I wish to dole out to those I see as responsible for the injustices that afflict my neighbors.

Isaiah 35 promises restoration to those who had been deported during the Babylonian Exile—though they had to wait generations for the highway to be opened for their return. The prophetic voice also proclaims a future in which all hopes are fulfilled.

God's redemption has broken into human history, and it will come more fully. In the times in between, that vision of wholeness speaks into places of suffering.

Hitsville, a Motown documentary released this fall, includes [a new video for "What's Going On."](#) It begins with Gaye live in concert, asking, "Who really cares to save a world in despair? Who really cares?" and includes video footage from the Flint water crisis and Black Lives Matter protests. There are also dramatized scenes of the aftermath of a mass shooting at a school and of a young black man wrongfully detained by police.

In one part of the video, as Gaye sings "We've got to find a way / to bring some understanding here today," a little girl gently wipes tears from a woman's cheek. In that scene I see a vision of God's love for humanity. God is a black girl reaching out her hand to touch a person in pain.

God is as close to us as bread and wine, close enough to wipe away our tears. Yet God is also the majesty and glory of Isaiah 35, a God who makes the wilderness glad and the desert rejoice.