

“The Fast God Chooses”  
Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2025  
Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-12

What do you suppose was happening in Israelite society to prompt those words from one of its prophets? The prophets don't speak randomly or rhetorically. And this isn't some old man ranting at kids on his front lawn. Their words are in response to real conditions and real threats to the wholeness and well-being of their society. So, if Isaiah tells his community that God is not pleased with their displays of piety, then we can be sure something has gone deeply wrong.

We hear it in the second verse: “Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways.” They're going through the motions of devotion, praying and contemplating on Torah. They appear to be sincere, saying all the right words and practicing all the right fasts. Yet we're told they do it all, “as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God.” Whatever they're doing is a sham.

Somehow the people of Israel have come to believe that all God requires of them is their lip service to Torah, the foundation of their faith. In the face of people who are harmed by the actions of unscrupulous people with power or by rulers who are indifferent to threats against people who are vulnerable, all that's required of devout Israelites, they believe, are thoughts and prayers. Isaiah is there to tell them that is not enough.

A symbolic response to people's suffering, even in the form of fasting, is inadequate. Isaiah describes instead the fast God chooses: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?” Sharing their food with the hungry, opening their homes to the homeless, covering the naked, these are physical actions taken on behalf of vulnerable people to relieve their suffering and correct the harm that's been done to them.

Isaiah is clear: God will not do these things for them. God will not care for the poor and release the oppressed. God has made it their job; our job. Reading this passage I'm reminded of the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu who once said, “Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.”

Isaiah is speaking to the population in Israel that has returned from exile in Babylon and is trying to re-establish themselves after a long period of absence. One of the reactions to that experience is the rise of a sort of religious nationalism. Many in the leadership have come to believe that Israel's future depends on their ethnic and religious purity. Expressions of public piety are popular and a rejection of outsiders, immigrants and aliens, has grown. That concentration on ritual purity has led to a kind of prosperity gospel that permits them to ignore their poor neighbors in the belief that poverty is a sign of God's disfavor. Isaiah is challenging them to look more deeply at what God requires.

We have a similar movement in our country with the rise of white Christian Nationalism. It's a political ideology obsessed with dividing people between blessed and cursed, in and out.

The three pillars of white Christian Nationalism are power, order and boundaries. It believes power is the result of wealth and political influence that allows dominance over the rest of society. It insists on order especially when it comes to gender identity and seeks to eradicate gay, lesbian and transgender people from civil society by eliminating their rights to fair treatment in the workplace and open access to healthcare. And it believes boundaries between men and women are to be strictly observed with women subservient to men. It's a movement that threatens the well-being of some of the most vulnerable people in our society, people whose lives are as precious to God as anyone else's. What might Isaiah have to say to a movement like that? And what does the prophet say to those of us who can see the injustice of such an ideology and yet remain silent?

Isaiah offers a clear and practical response to people who are suffering. He tells his community they cannot sit back and wait for God to act for them. They must take the initiative and provide relief for their neighbors. That's the fast God chooses them to observe. During the season of Lent we're encouraged to fast as an act of our piety, as a way to direct our thoughts away from ourselves and toward God. But Isaiah suggests that this sort of self-denial isn't intended to serve only our own spiritual growth. It's also meant to direct us outward toward those around us in need. This year Lent coincides with Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. Islam requires a much more disciplined practice, no food or drink from sunrise to sunset each day. And for Muslims, like us, this is a spiritual discipline to bring them closer to God, but it's also a way for Muslim people to identify with the poor of the world who are deprived of proper nourishment all year long. So, all three of our traditions, Jewish, Muslim and Christian encourage a fast that's meant to bring us closer to people who suffer, to realign our lives with those who struggle.

And if we aren't able to do that, then who will? Who else in this world is called to care for the vulnerable, to feed the hungry, to release the oppressed? Tonight we received the imposition of ashes on our heads. It's a reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. But it's also a reminder that we have this one time to act in the world on behalf of compassion and justice. We have this one chance to make a difference in the world and affect the lives of people who are suffering. There are people today in our society who are being targeted because of their immigration status or their gender identity, people who are being told directly and indirectly their lives don't matter. Who's going to stand with them? Who's going to walk alongside them and let them know they are accepted and loved? As Isaiah says, when we do that we become "repairers of the breach" and "restorers of streets to live in."

Even more than that, when we advocate for those treated unjustly we walk the way of Christ, the way of compassion, generosity and justice. And in the end that's what this season is really all about. We're given these weeks of Lent to open ourselves to the presence of Christ and be molded by the Holy Spirit more and more in the image of Christ. That journey begins anew tonight, with a smudge of ashes on our foreheads and a share in Christ's sacrifice through this meal. I encourage you to accept the fast God chooses this Lent with a commitment to live on behalf of the poor and rejected, to help set free those who are imprisoned by hatred and fear, and let your light rise in the darkness and bring hope to a world in despair.

Amen