

A Different Kind of Fasting

Isaiah 58:1-12

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58 1 Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
3 “Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

We have just entered into an alternative universe.
One that sounds ancient and irrelevant with phrases like
sins of the house of Jacob,
untie the cords of the yoke,
the day of fasting?

You might be saying, “Wait a minute, preacher, where is this going and what does it have to do with me in February 2006? I know lots about Fast Food but not much about fast-ing.”

I realized Wednesday night when I was preparing for this sermon that here I had picked a text about True Fasting from the prophet Isaiah and here I was watching a TV show called “The Biggest Loser.” My usual show, “Lost” was a re-run so I flipped to this one. Go ahead and admit it. Some of you watched it, too. This reality show pits these two families against each other to see which can lose more weight. The prize – \$50,000! But the struggle is worth it.

In a day and age where in this country most of us are counting carbs, calories, points, or fat grams, and we are watching TV shows about people losing weight, we have hunger issues in our community and certainly in our world.

I find this completely ironic especially on a day when we collect money to share with the Dorothy Day Soup Kitchen for Souper Bowl Sunday. Dorothy Day is a regular benevolence of our church. We volunteer to run the Soup Kitchen every 4th Thursday of the month and the 5th Saturdays on months that have 5 Saturdays. You read about it in the Oakleaf. More recently, you may know that Dorothy Day is the location which serves our poorest neighbors including men from the new temporary men’s shelter “Winterhaven.” Winterhaven in itself is a bit of good news in the Herald. Seth Crosby, head of TLC ministries, is taking his own tragedy and

turning it into healing and restoration. Another man, a contractor, donated the use of his building and is working alongside the United Way while the city comes up with plans for a more permanent facility. Dorothy Day is the Soup Kitchen where the men and others might go for a hot meal at lunch time.

And if you heard that scripture on Fasting and thought you entered an alternative universe- you did. In the biblical world of Isaiah, God's people, Israel, were struggling to be faithful. They had experienced exile. They had been conquered by the Babylonians and shipped off to exile. They were in crisis – identity crisis, economic/political crisis, and ultimately, a faith crisis. Now, not many of us have lived in exile, but perhaps we know what it is like to lose our home or our way of life. Perhaps it is different, but no less significant...

Let me share a personal feeling of exile for me...

Each time I ride down Main Street of my hometown, York. I miss Miss Smith's Dress Shop not because I miss working retail and selling women's clothes where I worked from each Saturday from age 14 through college. I miss it because it was part of my community. I miss Mrs. Kemp who managed the place and was always putting together her Sunday School lesson or buying supplies on Saturday for teaching the children at the Lutheran Church. I miss Mrs. Shillinglaw who taught me to mend clothes and who was a member of my church. I miss waving across the street to Ronnie Bailes at the Men's shop who coincidentally was one of my Sr. High Sunday School teachers. I miss going next door to Ferguson-Youngblood to buy my Orange Juice and seeing my great uncle Guy Smith. Is that because I am sentimental? Of course. But it is also because those people and those places have changed. And they helped form who I am. They were part of my community. It was my home, but is no more. Perhaps you have a place like that that is no more – a touchstone place which you can think on in gratitude, but also with loss.

Perhaps for you exile is moving out of your home where you lived with your loved ones and moving into a retirement community.

Perhaps exile means having to leave home because of a job change and your children will have to change schools. You will have to find a new church, a new community.

Perhaps exile for you is going off to college and learning to live with new roommates and new ideas.

Exile is not a comfortable place particularly for God's people who no longer had a Temple and the social fabric which held them together in faith. Their lives were in chaos. The institutional structures were gone. I don't think we are far from that. In a world that is rapidly changing, it feels totally chaotic at times. I don't know if it is because of my age – I am turning 35 today! Or because the world has just gone mad, but it feels like there is more chaos in the world than there used to be.

In recent history we have witnessed the threat of a Tsunami in Asia; earthquakes in Pakistan; devastation from Hurricanes in the Gulf Coast, which some of us have seen first hand; war in Iraq and Afghanistan; impending threat of nuclear arms from Iran and North Korea; an AIDS epidemic in Africa; bird flu in Asia and Turkey; Medicare and Medicaid cuts; student loan cuts; sex offender alerts by email; Amber alerts; elevated terror alerts.

I am tired of being on alert and in fear! It is enough to make anyone anxious.

We are in a different kind of exile. A different type of destruction is happening. One way to react is to dig in and hold on with all our might to some sort of order. We feel out of control. Some may even say we feel lost. We used to feel like at least we could control what happened inside the walls of our homes, but now with Internet and TV, we struggle to control the influence of outside voices on our children. Dr. Mary Pipher, writer of [In the Shelter of Each Other](#), calls it living in homes without walls. Now we feel like we have little control even over our own homes. When the Native Americans were being exiled and destroyed, Chief Cheyenne explained his conquerors this way to his people, "They are strange and do not seem to know where the center of the world is."

Maybe exile for us today is feeling like the world has lost its center.

Isaiah the prophet speaks to that in this book. These texts we read during Advent because it is a time of darkness when we are waiting for some light – the light of Christ’s birth. Isaiah speaks of Comfort and preparing the way of the Lord because these exiles were ready to hear some good news. Then they get home from exile and guess what? Things have changed. It wasn’t as easy as they thought.

Ask those folks still exiled because of the recent Hurricanes. It takes a long time to rebuild and reorganize. Experts claim that it will take 5 years to stabilize areas on the Gulf Coast. And home is not what it once was to these victims.

Yahweh God is this people’s Center in a world that feels like it had lost its center. They needed to rebuild and repair, but they also had to get back to God’s true priorities which in Chapter 58 are about True Worship of God. Fasting is an act of worship, but God saw through their outside religiosity and saw their hearts and their practices. I like to call the prophets the “Straighten Up and Fly Right” bunch. They are the ones brave enough to call us on our hypocrisies and to remind us of our Center – God. Like a good parent, Yahweh God has set some responsibilities or some boundaries, if you will. And every child needs good boundaries, not only for the sake of the child, but also for the sake of the whole community.

Isaiah points out our sin. On the day when we are fasting and trying to be religious, we are exploiting our workers. We are quarreling with one another, and striking one another with wicked fists. Yahweh God says the fast that He has chosen is not only that we humble ourselves before God, but that we are also being just, fair and loving towards our neighbors. We are guilty. We have sinned because our worship of God is not matched by our actions towards our neighbors.

So what then? Isaiah says to REPENT! Turn to God. Turn from our ways and discover new ways of living together. Therein lies the hope and the promise of the prophet. Like any good parent who helps to set boundaries, those boundaries are set so that we might thrive, and so that together we all might thrive as well. Listen to scripture and the different kind of fasting that God prefers...

58 6 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?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator a(2269) shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
10 if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
11 The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;

you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

The nation of Israel needed God's guidance. God speaks through the prophet Isaiah saying that our priorities must include a concern for the most vulnerable among us. Then we will see healing and restoration in a world that seems to have gone mad. Our world will be rebuilt on the foundation of God's compassionate justice.

Each of us is called to participate in such acts of compassion, but we are also called upon as a community and nation to do so.

"Uh oh, preacher," you might be saying, "now you're talking about mixing religion and politics." Exactly.

I know Christians who are doing that. Last week their story was reported on in many newspapers across our nation.

Rev. Jim Wallis, a leader in the movement and a founder of Sojourners community, said he is tired of just talking about abortion and marriage as the only faith issues in politics.

"When critics ask him how any issue could be more important than the 1 million lives aborted each year, Wallis challenges them to take a broader view of 'pro-life' values. He asks them how many children go to sleep hungry each year, how many sicken because their parents can't afford a doctor, and whether God would approve.

At the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, last week, Jim Wallis spent hours in conversation with the Rev. Rick Warren, the author of the mega-bestseller [The Purpose-Driven Life](#). Warren recently launched a global anti-poverty campaign with the Rev. Billy Graham. (By the way, Warren gives most of his profits away.)

The National Assn. of Evangelicals, based in Colorado Springs, Colo., is urging its 30 million members to pursue a 'biblically balanced agenda' — by fighting poverty as well as pornography, protecting the environment as well as embryos, promoting good government as well as the Gospel." (from The Los Angeles Times)

More and more Christians are asking good questions of faith and how it affects public policy. This is not a new idea. The founder of our theological heritage, John Calvin, said that the most important calling was not that of the clergy, but that of civil servants who affected how we live together, how we care for those most vulnerable, how we govern. While it is important for Christians to work for God's compassionate justice through our national, state and local governments, we must also as a church do so. It is interesting to me that Time's persons of the year 2005 were Bono of the pop band, U2, and Bill and Melinda Gates, of Microsoft. While they are acting out of their own faith, I wonder why the church is not just as outspoken on the issues of poverty and ready to do something about it.

Our church and its members are working on a different kind of fasting, too. They are folks sitting in here today.

- They are the volunteers at HOPE which offers emergency assistance to those in our community who need food, heat and medicine.
- They are the volunteers at the Dorothy Day Soup kitchen.
- They are those who donate towards the Compassionate care fund today – a fund which has provided heat, power, medicine, clothing, and other essentials to folks in our own neighborhood.
- They are those who buy Just Coffee. This summer in Mexico we saw how families are making a sustainable living through their coffee cooperative, Just Coffee – which is available in the Narthex each week through our Witness Committee.
- They are people trained in medical care who go to Honduras and Guatemala each summer. Or those who support the training of doctors there.
- They are volunteers going on mission trips.

- They are those who provide care through the Girl's Home, the Children's Attention Home, or the Park Ave. Adult Day Center.
- They are the 3 church members who serve as board members of Interfaith Hospitality Network and the numerous volunteers who feed guests and host here each week that we have guests who are without shelter.

Finally, it is each one of us who pledges financially to support these ministries through our church's benevolent giving.

These are the ones who Isaiah speaks of: Who loose the chains of injustice; who share their food with the hungry; who provide the poor wanderer with shelter; who see the naked and clothe them.

And Isaiah the prophet makes a promise... Your light will shine in the darkness...the Lord will guide you always...satisfy your needs...strengthen your frame...ultimately so that we worship the Lord in word and in deed.

The story is told of Heaven and Hell. A man died and went to hell. He saw around him a great feast. Tables covered with delicious dishes, but everyone around the table was gaunt and malnourished. They had long forks attached to their arms and were scooping up the food. But the forks were too long for them to feed themselves. They were starving. Finding in hell so much suffering he went to see heaven. In heaven it was the same scene, a feast. But the difference was that there was laughter and dishes clanging. The people were talking and enjoying the feast, but how? They still had the long forks attached to their arms. The difference was... they were feeding each other.

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Friends we come to this table today to feast. When Jesus sets this feast he says, "Come, to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Matt.11:28-29

Our Lord sets a feast but it is not just for us to enjoy. Each time we gather around tables we are thankful, but we always remember those who have nothing to eat. Let us come to this table to be filled not for our benefit alone, but so that we might go forth from this worship to, "spend ourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed." Isaiah 58:10

Prayer

O Lord our God, creator and ruler of the universe.
 In your wisdom, you made all things
 and sustain them by your power.
 You formed us in your image,
 setting us in this world to love and to serve you,
 and to live in peace with your whole creation.
 When we rebelled against you
 refusing to trust and obey you,
 you did not reject us,
 but still claimed us as your own.
 You sent prophets to call us back to your way.
 Then in the fullness of time,
 out of your great love for the world,
 you sent your only Son to be one of us,
 to redeem us and heal our brokenness.
 Therefore we praise you. Amen.