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"A True Fast"

On Ash Wednesday we began our journey into *Lent*-the weeks leading us *up* to Easter and *down* the path to the cross. This Lenten journey invites us to carve out time for things like lament, confession, and self-examination. It gives us space to identify *barriers* between ourselves, God, and one another.

Still, even as we recognize our blind spots and brokenness, God provides a path for redemption and hope. Because where we make *barriers*, God builds *bridges*. When we stray and wander God shows up to show us a *better* way.

One way God shows up is through prophets, like *Isaiah*. God uses prophets to comfort us but also to confront and convict us. God uses prophets to remind us of who we are, where we've come from, and the kind of God we worship.

So, now, I invite you to listen to what God may be saying to us, through the prophet Isaiah, the 58th chapter, verses 1-12. **Listen now for the Word of the Lord:**

"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. 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.

"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. 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. Is this 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?

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? 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?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 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, 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. 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. 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.

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

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We enter God's story at a time when the people of Israel just returned home. After nearly 50 years in exile they were finally back in Jerusalem. After decades of captivity in a foreign land, they were now free. Their city and temple had been destroyed, but construction was underway. They were trying to get back into a rhythm of worship by establishing religious routines.

But all was *not* well. God's people were still in self-preservation mode. Even in the way they worshipped-they were focused more on serving their own needs, than serving God and loving their neighbor.

They offered sacrifices, prayed prayers, sang songs of worship, and fasted. Outwardly, they seemed very religious and pious.

But inwardly, perhaps without even realizing it, their hearts were far from God. They were worshipping, but their worship didn't extend into other areas of life.

They fasted, but turned a blind eye to the oppressed.

They gathered for worship, but still exploited workers on the Sabbath.

They prayed for God to hear them, but they were deaf to the cries of the poor.

On top of that, they were viciously fighting among themselves, slandering one another, betraying friends and family members, and scrambling for power. Then, clothed in false humility, they have the nerve to roll up on God, and question why their prayers weren't being answered in a timely manner.

It's like God's people had a *serious* case of collective amnesia. It's like they forgot their own story. They forgot *they* were once the outsiders: the aliens, the foreigners, and the exiles. They forgot *they* were once forced into labor camps- and stripped of dignity. They forgot *they* were once hungry, naked, and poor.

They forgot they were blessed in order to be a blessing to the rest of the world.

They forgot how God heard *their* cry, and delivered *them*, when they were the ones who were desperate.

Like many times before, and many times after, God's people forgot *who they were*.

And they forgot *whom* they worshipped: They forgot they worshipped a God who *always* stands with the sick, the hungry, the poor, and the powerless; a God who delivers and restores people- not just *spiritually*, but physically, socially, and financially.

Because God's people *forgot* who they were and the God they worshipped-their *ritual* observances didn't translate into *ethical* practices. They may have believed the "right" things, but that belief didn't impact their *behavior*. In other words, their faith wasn't *faithful*.

But God was. God was faithful. And God spoke through Isaiah to call them back and remind them: Loving God and loving our neighbor aren't two separate things. To Love our neighbor *is* to Love God.

Now sometimes, when we hear passages like this one, it can be tempting to assume God doesn't care about (or even especially *like*) religious rituals and spiritual practices. *But that's simply not true*.

Does God want us to gather together for worship? Yes. Does God desire for us to pray? Yes.

Are we called to sing praises and fast? Yes, *of course*.

Those are all good things established for good reasons. A matter of fact, they're not just good, they're *biblical*. Even in the New Testament, when Jesus talks about fasting, he doesn't say "if you fast" he says "when you fast..." Spiritual practices like prayer and fasting can be powerful pathways toward a deeper connection with God and one another.

But, when our spiritual practices are wholly *detached* from how we live and love; when our *expressions* of worship become our *object* of worship; when our piety never impacts the public square; then friends, we're in deep trouble. Then our worship is just a kind of glorified, self-soothing, therapeutic, navel-gazing exercise. Then our worship is more about how it makes *us feel*, than how it brings glory to God or how it sends us out, to love our neighbor. This is what we hear in the 58th chapter of Isaiah.

Today's passage is neither soft nor subtle. It's a sledgehammer not a scalpel. It's brash, blunt, and gets straight to the point. God says plainly, "I won't acknowledge you-until you acknowledge the

injustice around you. I won't listen to you-until you listen to the cries of the poor and hungry." God says, "Go ahead: pray and fast and beg me to respond. But until you respond to those crushed by oppressive systems-systems you support and sustain- I will not listen to your prayers." The message is *clear* and, at least as I hear it, *convicting*.

It says even if we faithfully attend worship and diligently read our devotions; even if we lift our voices in praise and worship; even if we read our bibles, and pray, and fast; none of it matters if we don't *also* have a deep and abiding concern for justice. We simply cannot Love God, if we do not love our neighbor.

God is faithful, forgiving, and loving. But scripture seems to say God has no tolerance for apathy and indifference.

Through the loud, throaty cries of a prophet, God startles us out of our comfort zones. With the blow of a ram's horn, God disrupts our worship and declares it meaningless if it doesn't prompt us to confront powers, principalities, institutions, and systems that hurt others.

If we are to *love* God, we are to *love* our neighbors. And when we love our neighbors, we don't just feed them when they're hungry. We ask *why* they're hungry in the first place. When we *love* our neighbors, we don't just offer them a place to lay their head and crash for the night. We learn what systems contributed to them being homeless in the first place.

As God reminds us through the prophet Isaiah, Love and Justice are always *bound* to one another. There's just no getting around it. As professor Cornel West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Friends, I have a confession. I didn't want to preach on this passage. I found it a bit too abrasive and confrontational. I wanted to focus on a different text-one that invited us into more of a "contemplative" Lenten wilderness walk where we could spend time

in quiet reflection. But God kept pointing me back to *this* scripture and to *this* message: A message that *convicts* as much as it *comforts*. A message that reminds us if we choose to fast this lent, we do so only because we are privileged to have something to fast from.

Today's word from Isaiah reminds us that we can fall on our knees and pray; we can sing hymns and spiritual songs; we can teach bible studies and attend faith-based conferences; but if those things don't send us out to love God's *world* it's all religious vanity and spiritual self-indulgence.

Like I said, I didn't *want* to preach on this passage. I just wanted to hunker this Lent with a warm cuppa tea in one hand and my Lenten devotional in the other. But that's because I forgot who I was. I forgot my own story. I forgot the kind of God I worship.

It seems that's one of the trademarks of God's people: *forgetfulness*.

Like the Israelites in today's passage, we too can lose ourselves in prideful squabbles and anxiety over not having enough. As we slide into our own rhythms of worship, we can forget why we worship in the *first* place. We can forget that *our* healing and *our* freedom are *tied* to the healing and freedom of *others*. We can forget, as Songwriter Solomon Burke puts it, "None of us are free, none of us are free, when one of us is chained."

If you're fasting this lent, today's passage may feel a bit like a plot twist. Though it doesn't tell us to stop fasting it *does* redefine the kind of fast we're called to: To free those who are wrongly imprisoned, to stop the oppressive work conditions of migrant workers, to share our food with the hungry and to welcome the poor into our homes. To give clothes to those who need them, and to not hide from those who need our help. To stop gossiping and making false accusations and spreading vicious rumors; and always to defend those who cannot defend themselves.

In other words, the fast the Lord has chosen for us is a fast that points us *outside* of ourselves. It's a fast from a *comfortable* faith, one that doesn't raise any eyebrows or ruffle any feathers. It's a fast that reminds us of *who* we are and *whom* we worship.

So, will you join me? Will you join me in the fast God describes through the prophet Isaiah?

I hope so. Because when we participate in *this* kind of fast, scripture says we'll be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring. *Then* our salvation will come like the dawn-and our healing will come quickly. Then the Lord will rebuild those places in our lives and communities that have been devastated. Then the glory of the LORD will protect us, and when we call upon the Lord, the Lord will respond, "Yes. I am here." Amen.