

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Isaiah 58:1-14
September 1, 2024

True Fasting

I hope that you have enjoyed our Member in the Spotlight interviews this summer. It is a wonderful opportunity to learn more about some of our members and their faith journeys. Thank you to everyone who has been such gracious and willing participants!

As you've noticed, one of the questions that I ask is "How does what we do here on Sunday mornings inform the way you live throughout the rest of the week?" In other words, "What hill of a difference does carving out a few hours on Sunday morning make in our ordinary lives?" We've heard various responses, but mostly what I recall is that people feel refreshed, invigorated, and reset to live differently as God's people in a world that largely could care less that we exist.

The Scripture which Heather chose for us today is that reminder to God's people that honoring the Sabbath in the right spirit makes a difference in our lives. It was to be a time set aside for the Lord so that God could rebuild us, encourage us, and restore us after living in exile throughout the rest of the week. But as we shall hear, while they were going through the motions, they were also missing the point entirely on the heart of Sabbath keeping.

I'd like to read this from Eugene Peterson's "The Message" which provides a modern day paraphrasing of the scripture. In it, God, through the Prophet Isaiah, addresses both the individual and the nation of which they belonged. And I believe that this is still God's message for us today as Christians and as citizens of our nation as well.

1-3 "Shout! A full-throated shout!
Hold nothing back—a trumpet-blast shout!
Tell my people what's wrong with their lives,
face my family Jacob with their sins!
They're busy, busy, busy at worship,
and love studying all about me.
To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people—
law-abiding, God-honoring.
They ask me, 'What's the right thing to do?'
and love having me on their side.
But they also complain,

‘Why do we fast and you don’t look our way?
Why do we humble ourselves and you don’t even notice?’

3-5 “Well, here’s why:

“The bottom line on your ‘fast days’ is profit.

You drive your employees much too hard.

You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight.

You fast, but you swing a mean fist.

The kind of fasting you do

won’t get your prayers off the ground.

Do you think this is the kind of fast day I’m after:

a day to show off humility?

To put on a pious long face

and parade around solemnly in black?

Do you call *that* fasting,

a fast day that I, God, would like?

6-9 “This is the kind of fast day I’m after:

to break the chains of injustice,

get rid of exploitation in the workplace,

free the oppressed,

cancel debts.

What I’m interested in seeing you do is:

sharing your food with the hungry,

inviting the homeless poor into your homes,

putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,

being available to your own families.

Do this and the lights will turn on,

and your lives will turn around at once.

Your righteousness will pave your way.

The God of glory will secure your passage.

Then when you pray, God will answer.

You’ll call out for help and I’ll say, ‘Here I am.’

9-12 “If you get rid of unfair practices,

quit blaming victims,

quit gossiping about other people’s sins,

If you are generous with the hungry

and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,

Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,

your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.
I will always show you where to go.
I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.
You'll be like a well-watered garden,
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.
You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.
You'll be known as those who can fix anything,
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community livable again.

13-14 “If you watch your step on the Sabbath
and don't use my holy day for personal advantage,
If you treat the Sabbath as a day of joy,
God's holy day as a celebration,
If you honor it by refusing 'business as usual,'
making money, running here and there—
Then you'll be free to enjoy God!
Oh, I'll make you ride high and soar above it all.
I'll make you feast on the inheritance of your ancestor Jacob.”
Yes! God says so!

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

This morning I want to do several things. First we will learn a little background on the Book of Isaiah by considering when it was written, to whom it was written, and why it was written. Then we will look at several themes that stand out within it. And finally, we'll ask what is God saying to us today through it?

Scholars believe that the Book of Isaiah was written over a period of great upheaval and unrest, as the Assyrian empire was expanding and the northern kingdom of Israel was facing decline and imminent disaster. The prophet Isaiah, son of Amos, lived in the eighth century B.C. That said, the Book of Isaiah attributed to his namesake was most likely composed by three different authors during different periods of Judah's life as a nation.

Chapters 1-39, most likely written by Isaiah, Son of Amos, contain God's warnings to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah about how they had strayed far from God's intentions and as a punishment would be delivered in to the hands of the Babylonians.

Chapters 40-55, most likely written by someone else, were written after Jerusalem was destroyed and Babylonia exile had begun.

Chapters 56-66, were written by someone else, after exile and when the people were moving back into Jerusalem to rebuild their city and restore their broken lives.

Comprehensively, this book of prophecy tells the story of God's judgement and salvation, of God as the true king, and of coming Messianic king and suffering servant, Jesus Christ.

Today's section of scripture comes from this third section as God's people were returning from exile and trying to pick up the broken pieces of their lives in order to reclaim the blessing as God's beloved people. So that is Isaiah in a nutshell.

I am a foodie. I love to eat really good and interesting food. Karen and I enjoy exploring the food scene across the river in Portland which is a mecca for culinary delights. Though I must say, that ever since the pandemic, Vancouver is gaining its own bragging rights as a venerable competitor.

That said, regular fasting is not my specialty. I confess that it's most definitely the least of my preferred spiritual disciplines. I do try to practice it from time to time, not just for spiritual reasons but also for physical health. Today, intermittent fasting, or only eating within an 8-10 hour window each day, is all the weight loss craze.

But God addresses the fasting practices of his people in this section of Isaiah. Yes, they were doing it but they were also missing the mark of God's intentions.

In Isaiah's day, those returning to Jerusalem from exile practiced several regular fasts of which there are six in an observant Jew's year. Two major fasts call for refraining from eating and drinking as well as a variety of activities from sundown on the day before to sundown on the day of the fast. In other words, a full twenty four hours dedicated to mourning and repentance. These fasts occur on Yom Kippur or the day of atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year. And also on Tisha B'Av which recognizes specific disasters in Jewish history such as the destruction of Solomon's temple by the Babylonians and of the Second Temple by the Roman Empire in Jerusalem.

There are also four minor fasts from sunrise to sundown on the same day or abstaining from breakfast and lunch, and then breaking the fast at dinnertime. These have various connections to particular events in Jewish history.

Today there are many different sects in Judaism. Just as there are many different sects of Christianity. Not all of us believe or practice the same way. Strict Jewish orthodox sects most likely follow all of the fasts. Where as many secular Jewish sects may not practice them at all. Children under the age of 13 are not required to fast, nor are the sick or those who for health reasons should not.

The problem Isaiah raised in our text today was that they were going through the motions of the fast while their hearts they were missing the mark entirely. So, instead of being a time of reflection upon their own sinfulness, they saw it as a Quid Pro Quo deal with God. “If we obey your rule to fast on these days, then in return we expect you to answer our prayers and give us the good life.”

But my friends, God doesn't operate like this. God cannot be strong armed or manipulated by our piety and outward holiness. God is moved by a heart that is humble and contrite, one that is in tune with God's heart for justice, 24/7. Not just when it seems personally convenient or religiously appropriate.

Notice God's specific accusations about Israel's fasts.

“On the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists.”

Apparently God cares very much about the way we treat one another and especially those who in service to us, not just on fast days, but every day of the week.

My friends this is why coming to worship each week is SO SO important. Living in a culture that has abandoned it's love relationship with God leads us to forget that God expects us to live counter culturally in our homes, our schools, our work places, and our government.

As we have heard, worship gives us a breath of fresh air, so that we can live differently throughout the rest of the of the week. Without it, we will be just like the world which does as it pleases, exploits people under them, and quarrels with, name calls, and demeans those who are in opposition to us and our agendas.

Through Isaiah God says, “You can't live like this and expect me to listen to you or give you the good life. No! This is what I expect of you as you fast.”

Jesus said, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”¹

God expects us to humble ourselves. The Apostle Paul said, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitudes should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

¹ Matthew 6:16-18

Who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped or exploited, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.”²

Apparently, God expects us to loose the chains of injustice, untie the cords of the yoke.

To set the oppressed free.

To share our food with the hungry.

To provide shelter the poor wanderer.

To clothe the naked.

And to not turn away from our own flesh and blood.

God also expects us to stop blaming others for our problems or our country's problems. God expects us to take responsibility of our problems and own up to them. To stop bad mouthing others, especially those who may see different solutions than we do to those problems.

You see these are the conditions of true heartfelt piety that God wants to see in us. Not some outward show that makes us look better than we really are.

So if we do this, then Isaiah says that God will do this:

God will cause our light to break forth like the dawn and rise in the darkness as if it were day.

God will cause our healing to go before us. The image for healing that the Hebrew offers is that of a fresh wound that has finally scabs over.

God will guide us and provide for all of our needs. Maybe not our wants, but certainly our needs even when it doesn't seem like there is enough in the coffer for what you need to pay at hand.

God will physically strengthen us, and we will be well watered.

And God will help us rebuild those places in our lives and in our country that have been torn down or destroyed.

So what is God saying to us today?

A whole heck of a lot!

Now if you think that I'm going to get too personal and pointing the finger at you, I'm not. I'm just as complicit in these short comings as you are.

Now please don't your show hands. But how many of us like to go out to eat after church on Sunday? Have we ever thought that the luxury of having someone else feed us so we don't have to cook on Sunday's could be the kind of oppression that Isaiah is talking about today? Sometimes our honoring the Sabbath requires someone else to work. The problem with our Sabbath keeping routine is that it only seems to be a practice that those with money can afford to do. But if you are

² Philippians 2:3-7

from the working class or having to work several jobs to keep food on the table, you can't afford to take the Sabbath off.

That is why when the Sabbath was first instituted God specifically commanded it not just for us but for our sons and daughters, manservant and maidservants, oxen, donkeys, or other animals in our gates, and alien within our borders. So that we would remember what it was like to be indentured to someone as our ancestors were back in Egypt.³

What if God were simply saying to us, "Rethink your Sabbath practices and see how can you enjoy them without coming at a cost to other people having to cater to you."

Ok? What about this?

How many of us have rules at family gatherings where religion and politics are expressly forbidden topics? Have we ever thought that the political division in our country today and the inability to discuss important issues facing our nation began at our divided dinner tables?

My friends, I don't think our politically slanted news networks help much. It used to be that there were at most three news networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS which ran for 30 minutes a day at most. Today, we can choose whichever network most aligns with our politics and listen to their propaganda 24/7. And those sources are so toxic that we begin to believe that toxicity ourselves. We don't have to listen to others perspectives any more.

Some of us spend more time watching these news networks than we do reading our bibles or filling our minds with wisdom from above. What we fill our minds with continually, will eventually bleed out of us as well.

What if God were saying, "Stop pointing the finger at your political opponent. Stop blaming them for all of our nation's woes, and slandering them. Try fasting from being continually brainwashed by one side's political perspective and instead consider different points of view as well."

And finally, what if God were saying "I care deeply for how you look after the poor, the homeless, the alien, and the wanderer in your midst. I care more about that than I do your outwards shows of holiness." If that is true, then what are we doing to help their lives improve? Are we sharing the blessings we have been given? Or like I mentioned last week, do we just wish they would go away?

The Good News is that if we do these things, if we humble ourselves and pray to God, then God will hear our prayers and heal our land. But until we get our hearts right with God, we will just perpetuate the broken cycle of sin over and over again. And things will only get worse.

³ Deuteronomy 5:12-15

So may we consider baby steps of change. May we focus on what is truly important and close to God's heart. And may we also trust in the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ when we fall short. That is how God expects us to fast. Amen.