

Sunday, February 5, 2017
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In our first reading, Isaiah 58:1-9a, the prophet offers a conversation between God and the people, who long for God but who fail to follow God's call. Hear now God's holy Word.

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 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? 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 the Lord will say, Here I am. Amen.

Our second reading, Matthew chapter 5 verses 13-20, continues the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard the Beatitudes; today, Jesus offers further teachings to his disciples and the large crowd gathered to hear him. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For

I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the meditation: Like The Dawn

Text: "Let your light shine before others...." Matthew 5:13-20

Let us pray. O God of light, your Spirit reveals your presence in creation. Shine into our lives, that we may offer our hands and hearts to your work: to heal and shelter, to feed and clothe. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.¹

Whenever fasting shows up in Scripture, I can't help but think about my own experience with fasting. I've talked about it before, but when I was a freshman in college, I participated in a week-long fast during the season of Lent. Each participant got to choose the extent and form of their fast; I, with a determined enthusiasm that surprised exactly no one, decided to go for the full seven days on only water and apple juice.

If I had known how much sermon material I would eventually get out of it, I would have kept a more detailed journal.

Alas, I have only memory. And one of my favorite and also most embarrassing memories is of the very last afternoon. You see, not only was I fasting, but I had agreed to help put together the closing event, which brought together all the participants from colleges across Los Angeles for worship, fellowship, and, at the very end, FOOD.

I was in charge of chalking a labyrinth, a single path maze for walking prayer, onto a parking lot for people to use throughout the evening.

I had two friends and fellow fasters assisting me, and I had been looking forward to this task. What none of us had thought through, however, was exactly what it would be like for three very hungry people to spend two hours outside in the LA sun, on asphalt, bent in half, doing geometry.

Light-headed, hungry, and so over the whole thing, it's a miracle we didn't kill each other.

At any given moment, one of us was in tears. And I have never, before or since, spent such a prolonged period of time communicating solely in tones of rage. We snapped and argued and cried and yelled our way through creating what was supposed to be an instrument of quiet prayer and worship. And, perhaps worst of all, I have never been so okay with my own so-outrageous behavior.

¹ Prayer adapted from the RCL prayer resource for Year A 5th Sunday After Epiphany found at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>

So today's reading from Isaiah rings maybe a little uncomfortably close to home. "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."

The prophet sets up today's first reading as a sort of conversation between the people and God. The people of Israel have been fasting, trying to seek God in a time of crisis. And rituals of self-denial, like fasting, are often used to help refocus the mind away from earthly things and toward God.

We find the people desperately seeking signs of God's presence. This reading is from the final portion of the book of Isaiah, near the very end. The people are returning home from exile in Babylon, a return long expected and longed for. But as is often the case with things long anticipated, imagined, and hoped for, life back in Jerusalem wasn't quite what they expected.

Cultural differences had developed between those who had been taken to Babylon and those who had been allowed to remain behind. The monarchy had been wiped out. The temple had been destroyed, and with it the temple leadership and the heart of religious life. The exiles were returning to an unfamiliar place, to a home that wasn't what they remembered.

It was a time of division, of instability, and of uncertain leadership. And so the people turned to fasting, a comfortable ritual of self-denial that would, they hoped, bring God closer to them.

And God's response, offered by the prophet in today's passage, is a bit unsettling.

For God responds to their confusion and their longing almost callously: "they seek me as if they were a nation that practices righteousness; such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high."

This is unnerving, both to ancient readers and to modern ones.

And also unnerving, if we're talking about it, is the final part of our gospel reading, where Jesus tells his listeners that their righteousness needs to exceed that of the religious leaders, or else they will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

And I have to admit that I am unsettled by these parts of Scripture, and that, when I am faced with passages like these, I tend to choose to focus on other aspects of the readings.

But as I read and prayed this week, I kept thinking of the courage of our youth group.

Last Saturday, around midnight, the Senior High sat right here in the chancel for worship. And we talked about how sometimes the good news of the gospel can feel like bad news.

We talked about how sometimes the good news of Christ can be uncomfortable, and make us uneasy, and seem to set an impossibly high standard for following Christ. After all, Jesus preached his good news of God's kingdom by first calling all to repent.

And on a first read, I think both of these passages fit into this uncomfortable place.

The disciples and the crowd are seeking a new way, but they are told that all the laws of God still hold fast, and that righteousness is still expected of them.

The people of Israel are seeking God, but Isaiah tells them their chosen fast is not the path to God.

For in all this seeking, no true action has been taken. In all this seeking, the world has not yet been changed. The kingdom of God envisioned in the law and the prophets has not yet been accomplished.

The ancient people of Jerusalem seek God, but their seeking takes the form of further inaction, of a self-denial that weakens them.

As the people fast, their workers still suffer. As the people fast, they still argue. As the people fast, there is still hunger, and injustice, and division.

And when I think of my own fast, and of that final afternoon, I think about how I was out in the beauty of God's creation—a glorious day under perfectly blue skies, the San Gabriel mountains reaching to heaven all around me—and I think of how I was in good company, with friends in faith beside me—and I think of how I was doing a task I love, creating a piece of art for people to use to draw close to God.

And I saw none of it. For in my fasting and self-denial, I weakened myself to the point of inaction, and argument, and caused harm to those around me.

The people of ancient Israel were lost in the instability and uncertainty of their time. And they desperately longed for God. But all they did was choose to starve themselves into further inaction.

Today we also long for God and we seek God's ways, and we still argue with one another. There is still hunger, still homelessness, still violence and injustice. The foreigner is still not welcome among us. The sick are still not cared for. Our leadership is uncertain, and boy do times feel unstable and unreliable.

There is great division in our world, and it is so easy to feel lost in the midst of it. It is so easy to turn to our own versions of fasting—to familiar rituals that comfort us without changing anything.

But LOOK, God says. Look at your fast. Look at yourselves.

And here is where we remember that God's news is always good. For who are we, when we look?

You are the salt of the earth, Jesus says. You are the light of the world.

YOU—in all your beauty and brokenness, in all your imperfections and efforts—you are salt and light.

And these are phrases that have entered into our language and culture and have lost the vibrancy they first had. But these are Jesus' greatest object lessons, his built-in Children's Sermons!

Salt is flavor. You are the spice of the earth, Jesus says—the chili pepper of the earth! You are that salt!

And imagine a world without electricity, where light is not constantly around us. Into that utter and complete darkness, imagine a candle. You are that light!

You bring flavor to a world that needs it. You illuminate a world in darkness. In all the gifts God has given you, in the way God has created you, YOU are a gift to the world.

And so God does not choose a fast for you that humbles you, that denies you, that weakens you. God calls you to praise and worship through action—through YOUR action, through the fulfilling of the commandments so that God's kingdom might be built.

And our world right now is scary and uncertain. And it can be frightening to look at yourself, and to know yourself, and to share yourself without hesitation or restriction, for how quickly the world seems to tear down anyone who is different, anyone who tries to change it.

How much easier to fast! How much easier to make ourselves less than we are, to weaken ourselves so that we might shape ourselves into the kind of person the world rewards.

But we get cranky when we're hungry.

We can't enjoy God's beauty, or the company of friends, or the good work before us. We argue, and cause pain to others, and worse, we stop caring that we've done so.

When we don't feed ourselves, we lose our flavor. We lose our light. We turn away from the promise of the kingdom of heaven.

But look! God says. You are salt. You are light.

Feed yourself. And then share yourself with the world.

And the very best news of all? You are not alone.

Jesus doesn't speak to the singular "you" in this declaration of who we are, but to the plural: You ALL are the salt of the earth. You ALL are the light of the world.

All of us, together. You are not alone! Someone will feed you when you are hungry, and free you when you are bound, and remind you that you are God's beloved when you are lost.

You are salt. You are light. You are hands and feet and voice, created and loved by God. And in God's love we have nothing to fear.

So feed the hungry. Shelter the homeless. Tend the sick. Welcome the stranger. Shout out so those in power cannot help but hear you. Change the world so that injustice and inequality are no more.

These are not easy tasks. It's risky to change the world. Salt can sting, and light can expose. Breaking the bonds of injustice and shattering the structures of inequity will be uncomfortable and scary.

But you are God's beloved—God's light shines through you. We are not called to make ourselves less than what we are, or to hide the fullness of ourselves. Rather, we are called by Christ to risk sharing our light with the world.

We are called not to fast, but to be full, and to be fully ourselves. We are called to difficult, uncomfortable holy work of change. We are called to build the kingdom of God, and it will look different than the world we find so familiar.

But we are salt and light, and our light breaks forth into the world when we choose to follow God's call and break every yoke so that all might be freed and fed and know themselves as God's beloved.

Thanks be to God!