

Prayer for Illumination

Merciful God, your Word is our way of truth and life. Create in us hearts that are clean and place your Holy Spirit within us, so that we may receive your grace and declare your praise forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Isaiah 58:1-12

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. ²Yet 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. ⁴Look, 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. ⁵Is 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? ⁶Is 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? ⁷Is 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?

⁸Then 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. ⁹Then 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, ¹⁰if 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. ¹¹The 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. ¹²Your 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 Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Meditation

It is customary and has become tradition on Ash Wednesday to place ashes while speaking the words, ‘Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ This service begins the season of Lent, when in confessing one’s sins, Christians often abstain or fast from either a food or a habit intentionally focusing on repentance and our relationship with God. The practice of Ash Wednesday actually began in the Middle Ages as a time when a congregation identified the sinners within, and publicly presented these repenting sinners to the church for church discipline. Yet another reason to be thankful we do not live in medieval times.

Though, these past couple years have felt like such times as science struggles to get ahead of a deadly pandemic. The imposition of ashes is practiced to remind us of our own mortality. It seems that we need less reminding this year. As COVID wanes, the current crisis, the relentless

attacks, the war against the people of Ukraine reminds us, yet again, of our humanity's intimacy with mortality. We mourn, you and I, yet even in our mourning we cannot truly imagine what life must be like for Ukrainian families, nor for those brave Russian souls who stand against the action of their leader. In a conversation with a Rabbi friend yesterday, he reminded me of the belief that by joining in another's suffering, one-sixtieth of that person's suffering is lifted. If this is true, may more of us join in their suffering.

The house of Jacob knew of such suffering. Like today's residents of Kiev, the prior generations of Jacob had been brutally removed from Jerusalem. And finally, this generation, the generation to whom Isaiah is writing returned to the city only to find it in ruins. They longed for life to return to the normalcy they once had as a people. They began dreaming of rebuilding the sacred spaces and the societal and religious structures as they once were known to be. To return again to way things once were. They did all they could to return to their notion of normal, and through fasting they enlisted God as their helper.

Though our situation pales in comparison to the Israelites exile, we can relate to their desire to return to worship as we once knew it, to a mask-less life as we once knew it. Still wrestling with an elongated pandemic we can relate to this desire to return to normal.

“Shout out, do not hold back!” our text opens. “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.” If we have been listening over these past two years, while in our own vulnerable state, we too heard voices shouting out announcing the sins of the people. These voices too often came from beyond our immediate communities, revealing a harsh reality that it is often the privileged who desire normalcy. Unveiled by those shouting voices were the many injustices remaining and being practiced among the people. Shouts revealing systemic racism. Shouts highlighting the continued prejudices against our trans community, and our entire GLBTQIA+ siblings. Shouts against the suppression of women's rights; against the suppression of voters' rights. Scientists shouting again and again with cautions about climate change. Isaiah opens today's text with, “Shout out, do not hold back... Announce ... to the house of Jacob their sins.”

Offended by the shouts was the house of Jacob, for they had worshipped God, humbled themselves and fasted to receive God's favor but things still weren't going as they hoped. In frustration they prayed to God, “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

God says to God's people, this is the fasting *you* choose; you focus on yourself, and oppress your workers, while you fast. You fast to quarrel and fight. Isaiah then turned them toward the fast God was inviting them into. Walter Brueggemann, in his commentary on this passage, describes his interpretation of God's understanding of fasting saying, “The God of Judaism is not a God who likes to be flattered in a more or less passive routine of worship; this God is out working in the neighborhood and wants all adherents doing the same.”

Can it be, as Isaiah says, that God prefers not to be the primary focus of our fasting? That, instead, our fasting should lead us into our community and our greater world to respond to the needs and address the injustices within? God's words through Isaiah, “Is not this the fast I

choose: To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry and your house with the homeless, and your clothes with the naked, and to not hide yourself, to not ignore your sisters and brothers. Is not this the fast I choose.”

Fasting as giving up coupled with a giving of. The giving up of oneself for the giving of oneself toward something greater than oneself. And the giving of, according to the God of Isaiah, is a giving of oneself to fill the needs of neighbors, to address the injustices within our community, a giving of to the greater community. Is not this the fast I choose for you.

If, Isaiah continues, If such a fast is practiced...Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly. Then you shall call and the Lord will answer and guide you continually. Then your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt. Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. Then you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Then you will have fasted. Embarking on our Lenten journey, may we enter such a fast together.

Amen.