

April 2, 2017  
Lent IV  
Isa 58: 6-12

## What is Our Work?

Isaiah 58... words of doom and gloom, irony, and words of hope. Listen to the first words of the chapter:

*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.<sup>3</sup>*

*“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.*

*<sup>4</sup> Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.*

And then the author goes on to describe the FAST that God CHOOSES:

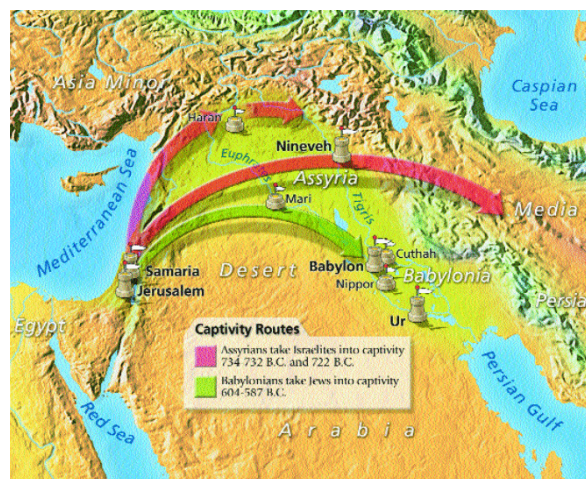
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup> 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?

It sounds like God is not very pleased with this people...

this people dedicated to God...  
carted out of their promised land (Israel),  
their temple and their king  
to live in a very foreign country (Babylon),  
for what would turn out to be **70 years**.

In all that time, they saw themselves  
as loyal to their God...



And so they were discouraged and defeated  
and couldn't understand why God did not rescue them.  
They wanted God's justice!

Oh they were serious.

Twice a year they fasted for a whole month at a time..  
that's corporately,  
fasting two months **every year for 70 years**  
to get God's attention  
so God would bring them back to their promised land.  
Why didn't God answer them?  
What was the purpose of fasting  
if God didn't answer their prayer to be rescued?

And here it is! God's answer...

which I think is just as timely today  
as it was more than 2500 years ago.

God says: **is your FASTING changing your behavior**  
towards the least around you?

Look around at what your everyday actions  
**ARE** doing .. or **NOT** doing  
to the people who are most vulnerable.

God says:

*I'm going to re-define "fast" for you:*  
(spoiler alert: You don't "FAST" to manipulate me  
into getting what you want...  
as righteous as that might seem to you....)  
Is your FASTING doing anything for anyone but you?

**Fasting is not to manipulate God**, but to put us in a posture to be changed by God.

Over and over again,

we hear in the Old Testament, and from Jesus...  
God wants the poor and the vulnerable taken care of.  
**And the way that happens is through us!**

It's a brilliant system really...

one in which the human family is all interdependent...  
like a nuclear family.

Isn't it every parent's fervent wish  
that his or her children will take care of each other..  
look out for each other ..  
making sure they all have enough...

even though one child might have all the **brains**,  
and another all the **money**,  
and another all the **personality**.

\*\* In a way God was asking this people:

“how will things be any different  
if you go back to your homeland?

You will still have:

The unhoused, unfed, unclothed,  
abandoned children and elders among you...

***get it right here.. then we'll talk!!***

This Lent season's theme has been

***“Let justice roll down like the waters” ...***

justice: where everything is right in God's eyes...  
where all are cared for, and included.

Our baptism into this faith  
calls for a change

from how **the world** sees ***“fair”***  
to how **God** sees ***fair***.

Our baptism changes us  
from a “me” orientation,  
to a “we” orientation..  
and that “we” includes all.



In the **early church**,

**baptism** took place at the **Easter Vigil**.

And the first act of the newly baptized  
was to come to the communion table.

On the table was not just the cup of wine,  
but a cup of water

to signify their coming through the Red Sea...  
and a cup of milk and honey..

to signify coming into the promised land.

And perhaps they were reminded,

as Moses' followers were reminded (Deut.15)

*<sup>7</sup> If there is among you anyone in need,  
a member of your community in any of your towns  
within the land that the Lord your God is giving you,  
do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted  
toward your needy neighbor.*

<sup>8</sup> *You should rather open your hand,  
willingly lending enough to meet the need,  
whatever it may be...*

<sup>1</sup> *Since there will never cease  
to be some in need on the earth,  
I therefore command you,*

*Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.*

<sup>5</sup> *Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,  
and the Lord your God redeemed you..”*

We hear that in the early church,  
everything was held in common,  
so no one would lack for any of life's basic needs.  
And when they celebrated  
holy communion, the Lord's meal,  
it was in fact not God's meal IF  
there were there any among them hungry.

I do believe this remains **our job description**

as people of faith ..

to bring God's justice in a very unjust world...

to care for the vulnerable

at a time when

people are arming themselves

and taking on more of an "us vs them" mentality...

get what you can while the getting's good.

Jesus tells us:

*"Let your light shine for all to see!"*

That happens here...

and it happens more and more.

It is the culture in this church.

\*\* And when someone new comes among us,  
it is our job to apprentice them into what we do.

**Generosity is a learned behavior.**

**Dorothy Day**, who died in **1980 at age 83**, was nitty gritty down to earth saint.



She was a journalist,  
 a social activist,  
 a suffragette,  
 a pacifist,  
 and a catholic convert.

She helped start the **Catholic Workers Movement**, which cared for the poor.

**Dorothy had a lot of Isaiah in her..** listen to some of her quotes:

*"I really only love God  
 as much **as I love the person I love the least.**"*

*"The Gospel takes away our right forever,  
 to discriminate **between the deserving  
 and the undeserving poor.**"*

*"What we would like to do is change the world—  
 make it a little simpler for people to  
 feed, clothe, and shelter themselves  
 as God intended them to do.  
 And, by fighting for better conditions,  
 by crying out unceasingly  
 for the rights of the workers,  
 the poor, of the destitute-  
 the rights of **the worthy and the unworthy poor.**"*

So.. in reading this portion of Isaiah,  
 God has work for us to do.  
 Dare we **STILL**  
 even ask what our work is?

*Releasing chains,  
setting free the mistreated,  
sharing your bread with the hungry  
and bringing the homeless poor into your house  
covering the naked when you see them.*

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;  
you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here."

(and my *favorite* line):

*You will be called Mender of Broken Walls, Restorer of Livable Streets.*

Wow!

God has work for us to do!

So turn to someone near you and say,  
***"Let's get to work!"***

**AMEN!**



***Preached by the Rev. Pamela Nelson-Munson at Eugene's First United Methodist Church.***