

ASH WEDNESDAY | FEBRUARY 14, 2024

ISAIAH 58:1-12

For the past couple of weeks, I've been reading a book by Jonathan Sacks called *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*. Sacks was the chief rabbi in the United Kingdom for almost two decades, and *Morality* was the last book he wrote before he died in 2020.

In the introduction, this is how he describes the situation we find ourselves in:

Few people in recent years can have escaped the feeling that strange and unprecedented things are happening... Some deep and destabilizing transformation is taking place in the twenty-first century, but it is hard to say what... This can lead to feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, and fear, and a desperate desire to find people who will resolve the difference for us.¹

Sacks's fear is that we respond to this powerlessness, anxiety, and fear by turning inward. By focusing on ourselves. By focusing all on the *I*.

The problem and danger that Sacks identifies is not wholly dissimilar from what the prophet Isaiah describes in today's Hebrew Bible reading. This was written when the people of Israel finally got to return home after their time in exile. For decades, they had built up ideas in their heads about their glorious return home when everything would go back to normal. And when they arrived, they discovered that it was... not what they expected. The city was largely in ruins. The temple, the center of religious life, was gone. And the community, which had been geographically dispersed, found its social fabric riven as well.

And so the prophet describes how people responded. They turned inward. They started to focus all on the *I*. They fasted. They wore sackcloth. They put on their saddest face and moped around. All in the hopes that God would be so moved by their plight that some act of divine intervention would come down from on high and fix all of their problems.

So notice how the prophet responds:

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?

The way that we fix our problems, the prophet suggests, is not by making ourselves miserable until God intervenes. But by trusting that God can work in, through, and among us as we live together as the people of God.

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 3.

It's worth noting the last image that the prophet uses here as well. By extending the love of God to your neighbor, they declare, "you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." The image the prophet reaches for is not the restorer of the house. Or the restorer of the estate. Or the restorer of the McMansion. But the restorer of the streets. A public space. A space where people of all backgrounds and histories, beliefs and hopes are brought together.

Here's how Sacks puts it. "When we move from the politics of 'Me' to the politics of 'Us,' we discover those life-transforming, counterintuitive truths: that a nation is strong when it cares for the weak, that it becomes rich when it cares for the poor, that it becomes invulnerable when it cares about the vulnerable."

As we begin this season of Lent, we are invited to a time of intentional self-examination. But the prophet Isaiah and the late Sacks remind us that this self-examination is never meant to turn us further in on ourselves but to help us reflect on the welfare of our neighbors.

So as we walk with Jesus toward the cross, we walk not as solitary individuals on our own personal journeys. Instead, we pilgrimage together as the people of God. Diverse in where we come from and how we got here. But united in where Christ is leading us and who Christ is forming us to be.

And in the process, we find our own life-transforming, counterintuitive truth. That by following Jesus in the way of the cross, we become the restorer of streets to live in.

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