

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | FEBRUARY 5, 2023

ISAIAH 58:1-12 | PSALM 112:1-10 | 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-12 | MATTHEW 5:13-20

There's an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* where Larry David is at a dinner party when someone's overly expressive gesturing sends a bowl of sauce flying all over him. Another guest down the table calmly says, "Somebody get a sponge." To which Larry replies, "I don't understand. Why don't you get a sponge?"

It's not a bad way of understanding the relationship between the Israelites, the prophets, and God in the Hebrew Bible. The writings of the prophets are full of beautiful images of God's steadfast love and the restoration of God's people. We heard a lot of those during Advent. But they are also full of arguments about the nature of their covenant, who bears responsibility for their woes, and who should be doing what. Why don't *you* get a sponge?

In today's reading from Isaiah, the Israelites come to Isaiah with a complaint. "Why do we fast, but [God] do[es] not see? Why humble ourselves, but [God] do[es] not notice?" In the world of the Hebrew Bible, fasting was a way of pointing out that something had gone wrong.¹ It was sort of like going on a hunger strike to grab people's attention. There was some calamity happening, some unfortunate event, and so people engaged in these rituals of mourning as a way of convincing their deity to relent.

In the case of the Israelites, the calamity is an underwhelming return from exile. They've come back to their home and found it to be a mess. The streets are rubble. The buildings shaken to the foundations. And the social fabric has been torn up. The people believe God must still be punishing them, so they start fasting.

But for all their fasting, God seems to be absent, not listening to their cries, not hearing their laments. Nothing changes. That would be bad enough on its own, but it's even worse because the people say they are doing everything right. They seek and delight to know God's ways. They ask of God righteous judgements. They delight to draw near to God. And yet, God seems entirely unmoved by their devotion. So what's the problem?

Well, pay attention to the picture Isaiah paints. On the day they are meant to fast, they "bow down their heads like a bulrush," the weeds you'd see around a marsh. So they dramatically mope around. They put on sackcloth and roll around in ashes. But that's not all they do. They argue with each other. They commit acts of violence. They don't pay their workers a fair wage. They look out for number one. It's meant to be an absurd picture. They stab their neighbor in the back, but they wear a sackcloth while they do it.

We don't really use sackcloth and ashes anymore, but you know the type of behavior Isaiah is getting at. It isn't hard to find examples of people using religious language, images, and practices to feed their own our ego or to gain the acclaim of others while changing very little of their behavior. Maybe it's the constant invocation of thoughts and prayers as a way to deflect attention after a tragic event. Or the use of "As a Christian..." as a way of saying "I'm a good person..." Sometimes it seems like people's favorite part of following Jesus is telling other people that they're following Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah is having none of it. But pay attention to what he criticizes. What Isaiah criticizes is not worship or fasting or spiritual devotion or prayers (or thoughts!). It's expressions of faith that are ostentatious, grandiose, and self-serving. Actions done more out of anxiety over our own social status than concern for our neighbors' welfare.

¹ Good summary here: "Fasting in the Hebrew Bible," *Bible Odyssey* (blog), accessed January 30, 2023, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/fasting-in-the-hebrew-bible/>.

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These are “rituals” in the worst sense of the word. Actions that change nothing, not even the person performing them. For Isaiah and the prophets, ritual without action is worse than a waste of a time. It’s idolatrous. Because the people assume that these problems that are afflicting them are God arbitrarily punishing them. But Isaiah says they’re actually problems of their own making. They have taken the works of their own hands and ascribed them to God.

So what does God declare? Not just a takedown of this self-serving piety but a positive vision of God’s covenant in action. “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?”

You can see Isaiah’s point loud and clear. If you are going to fast, don’t do it to try to impress your friends or cajole God into relenting of some punishment. Fast so that you pay attention to your neighbor. If you want to fast, don’t just eat twice as much tomorrow. Take your daily bread and give it to someone who needs it.

But Isaiah makes a more subtle criticism here, too. This is the one I think is more interesting. Early on, Isaiah seemed to be suggesting that the problem with their fasting was that it was too ostentatious. It was too concerned with getting other people’s attention. But here, Isaiah parses out a particular problem with their fasting. That it was a way of “hiding yourself from your own kin.” You want people who are powerful and wealthy and enviable to pay attention to you. But at the same time, you’re trying to hide from your neighbor who is hungry or naked or unhoused or in prison. It’s as if Isaiah is saying that the front that you’re putting up to impress your neighbors, is also a fence to keep out the people who can’t afford to live in your neighborhood. It’s a way of further dividing their society. No wonder this fasting does nothing to change their society.

But change is possible. Isaiah says when these expressions of private piety become acts of public service, everything changes. Isaiah says that “if 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.” So as much energy as Isaiah puts into criticizing the self-righteous spirituality, he puts even more energy into letting us know that a better world is possible. And the path to get there is not to make ourselves miserable until we get God’s attention. It’s to love our neighbors the way God loves them.

In the Jewish tradition, this is called *tikkun olam* or “repair of the world.” God doesn’t just command us to not make things worse or leave no trace but empowers us to restore and repair God’s creation. And that’s exactly what Isaiah tells us. “You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

In the Christian tradition, we would call this “building the kingdom of God.” Creating a world that reflects the kingdom of God begun in the ministry of Jesus. Rebuilding the ancient ruins, the wastes of our wraths and sorrows, and creating the foundation of equity and mercy in our public life.

That is the ministry that God not only calls us to but empowers us to live out. Instead of hiding from our neighbors or seeking quick fixes or getting stuck in self-serving rituals, God empowers us to do the hard work of repairing the breaches that tear us apart. So ditch the sackcloth. And let your light dispel the world’s gloom.

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