

Too Slow to Fast

Isaiah 58:2-11 They seek me day after day, desiring knowledge of my ways like a nation that acted righteously, that didn't abandon their God. They ask me for righteous judgments, wanting to be close to God. ³ "Why do we fast and you don't see; why afflict ourselves and you don't notice?" Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast; you hit each other violently with your fists. You shouldn't fast as you are doing today if you want to make your voice heard on high. ⁵ Is this the kind of fast I choose, a day of self-affliction, of bending one's head like a reed and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? ⁷ Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? ⁸ Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here." If you remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech; ¹⁰ if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon. ¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually and provide for you, even in parched places. He will rescue your bones. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that won't run dry.

Too Slow to Fast

Today's scripture lesson is from the book of Isaiah. This book is very much about the relationship between God and the people of Israel. It begins just before they were carried off into captivity in Babylon, covers their time in captivity, and the period immediately afterward when they began to return to Israel from Babylon. The people of Israel had been through a traumatic experience that covered several decades. They had been living in the land of Canaan, the land that was promised to Abraham and his descendants in the ancient stories. They were ruled by a line of Kings who descended from King David. Some were better than others, but you always knew who was in charge - and who would be his successor. The glorious temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem was the religious center of the country. It was there that the priests from the tribe of Levi led the people in prayers and sacrifices. It was there that the grand ceremonies of the annual feasts and the High Holy Days were celebrated. And then . . . everything fell apart.

The Babylonian army conquered Jerusalem and the nation of Judah. Many of the people, especially leaders, the talented, and the educated were taken away as prisoners to Babylon. The city of Jerusalem, the capital city of the nation of Judah, was demolished. The walls of the city were torn down. Buildings were destroyed. Most importantly, the Temple was completely destroyed. In the theology of the Israelites, God was especially present in the Temple, in the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber where only the priest could enter and then, only rarely. On top of everything else, the monarchy was also destroyed. The Israelites, the people of God, lost their leadership, their homes, their God-given land, and the holy site where they came to be near to God.

We all remember the shock and horror of 9/11, when the twin towers were destroyed and the Pentagon was hit. We were appalled at the carnage, the loss of life. But there was also a wound in our national identity. As a people, we felt vulnerable. We were no longer complacently safe. The icons of our economic strength had been reduced to rubble, and the bastion of our military strength had a gaping wound on one side. That experience has had a lasting effect on our self image as a people. Imagine the even greater trauma if the White House, the Congress, and the Supreme Court and all of their inhabitants had been killed or captured and carried off. What if the leaders of major corporations, the professors in colleges and universities, the scientists and engineers that design and run our utilities, our cable networks, and our communications systems were hauled away to serve the bidding of a foreign country? That's what the Babylonians did. They skimmed off the brightest and best of Israel and took

them away. But beyond that, there's no way for us to experience the emotional devastation of the destruction of the temple. No matter how many mega church facilities and cathedrals might be leveled, it wouldn't result in the emotional devastation that the Israelites felt when the temple was totally destroyed. We just don't emotionally tie God to a physical place of worship like they did.

They learned the hard way that it was possible to lose the land they had received from ancient covenants. They lost the monarchy and the government it supplied. They lost the worship center that was the dwelling place of God. They tried to find a way to put their identity and their relationship with God back together. Worship became the way that they tried to restore their identity from the past. They sought God continually – not just on the Sabbath, but day after day. They studied and studied. They bowed their heads humbly; they put on the sackcloth and ashes of mourning. **And**, they fasted . . . frequently. The only fast required by the Law of Moses was on the Day of Atonement, once a year. But these people sought to be super worshippers. If once a year was the requirement, then frequent fasting had to be even better.

Many a minister wishes that the congregation had that sort of devotion to worship. Oh, to have a congregation that's eager to bounce out of bed on Sunday morning and head to church. Pastors dream of Sunday School attendance being the same as attendance in worship. How thrilling it'd be to hear that folks want to come back together on Sunday evening to sing and pray, that they would fill the pews to hear a guest minister preach for four or five evenings. And what if the building and grounds committee was overwhelmed by requests that we put in kneelers, so that we could drop to our knees in humility to pray? And wonder of wonders, what if fasting was a common spiritual practice? I tell you, Isaiah didn't realize how good he had it!

But despite all of their piety, their intense focus on worship, and their frequent fasting, God didn't seem to be taking notice. It didn't seem to be working. And then, through Isaiah, God spoke. "Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, **as if** they were a nation that practiced righteousness." **AS IF** they practiced righteousness! How can God say that? These folks are mega-worshippers. They're meticulous in their observances. And my goodness, they fast at the drop of a hat! What does God mean, "**as if** they practiced righteousness?"

God asks, "Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? You fight among yourselves, you oppress your workers, afflict yourself with not eating – in fact, fasting from food has become an idol for you – and you hang your head and sit around in mourning clothes. You're quick to fast from eating, but you're slow to get around to the fast **I** choose. Instead of fasting from food, take a day and fast from self-centeredness. Fast from quarreling. Fast from oppressing your workers. Take a break from feasting by yourself . . . and share your food with the hungry. Fast from ignoring the homeless and folks with inadequate clothing. When you ignore the needs and suffering of other people you're hiding from your own family, because you are **all** my children. You've been too slow to fast, too slow to get around to the kind of fast that **I** choose! Do you really want there to be a day and time acceptable to your Lord? Then choose the kind of fast that **I** choose!" They had forgotten how God had liberated them from Egypt, fed them in the wilderness, and given them a homeland of their own. They failed to pay it forward.

The Israelites had the audacity to expect God to care for them -- when they failed to care for one another. They thought that worship made them righteous and good. It's easy to drift from feeling righteous to being self-righteous. Then it becomes easy to feel more righteous, more worthy than others, and it becomes easy to overlook their needs, to hide from our own family, as Isaiah expressed it.

What does this passage have to say to **us**? Do **we** concentrate so much on worship that sometimes it seems like that's the whole focus of the church? We worry about whether our worship is traditional or contemporary, whether the paraments on the table and the pulpit are the right color for the season, whether we put up appropriate banners, whether the candles are lit. Should the choir wear their robes and stoles today? Is the communion bread leavened or unleavened? Should the Advent wreath have one pink candle or should all four be purple? Many a regular church goer knows everything about worship – everything except that it should change us! The more we concentrate our energy on the

meticulous details of worship, the less time we have to look around us, and the less energy we have to spend on others.

Verses six and seven declare what God wants most of all: worship that frees people from injustice and burdens, from oppression, and from hunger. This is worship in our daily lives -worship in which we don't hide ourselves away from the needs of the least, the lost, and the last. On our way to the sanctuary, do we walk right past the wagon for food for the hungry? Just showing up for worship doesn't cut it!

I know that the heater in the women's rest room quit working after only forty years of service. I know that it's cold and uncomfortable in there. Believe it or not, all of the men truly understand, because there's never been a heater in the men's room. But I wonder, how many of us, men or women, as we felt the shock of a cold surface on bare skin, paused to wonder who we might assist who had no heat in their whole house? Have we thought to count our blessings - and pay them forward?

God loves each of us. In response, God asks us to fast, to live a day acceptable to the Lord. Our response to God's love is to fast from overlooking everyone else God loves. None of us is genuinely prosperous and living in the harmony and peace we call shalom - unless we all prosper and live in shalom. As we reconcile with others, we become reconciled with God. We are made in God's image. At the very core of our being we bear the image of God. And we are true to that image when we imitate God's acts of loving kindness in our care of each other and our care of all of God's creation. This passage calls for us to move from self-preoccupation and return to authentic personhood, to be the person we were created to be, the person within us that is in the image of God.

Here on Sunday morning we worship with our lips, offer praise and thanks, and give in gratitude for all that we have received. Here we listen with ears and hearts to know how better to serve. But worship doesn't end at noon. In fact, it only begins, as we leave to go worship God with our very lives throughout the week, to fast from overlooking opportunities to be God's light in the world, as we live a day acceptable to the Lord. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Worship isn't the goal and end of our faith.
From worship we journey into the week,
Worshiping with our very lives,
Fasting from overlooking the hurts and needs
of the rest of the family of God,
living a day acceptable to the Lord.
Don't be slow to fast the fast God chooses.