

March 13, 2011
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 58:1-12

The Fast I Choose

Introduction to Text

Our reading this morning comes from the Prophet Isaiah. I want you to take note of our text. I want you to put it in your pocket and take it home with you. I want you to stick it on your refrigerator and read it from time to time – because we are going to be coming back to it week after week after week during this Lenten season.

Isaiah was prophet in the southern kingdom of the divided Israel – Judah. Isaiah the person lived around 730 BCE. At the time of Isaiah Judah had become a vassal state of the Assyrian empire – they were no longer able to govern themselves independently – they are paying a tribute to keep the Assyrians off their backs.

The book of Isaiah is one both of judgment and of promise. Isaiah as prophet speaks for God. Isaiah speaks God's judgment and promise not only his people (historically Israel) but for all nations.

Our reading this morning comes from what is referred to as 3rd Isaiah (Chapters 56-66). Scholars believe that this particular section of Isaiah was not written by the prophet himself but by a disciple (student) of Isaiah. It was most probably written some 200 years after Isaiah lived. By this time the people of Judah – had not only been taken from their homes and their lands – where

they lived in exile in the land of Babylonia – but had returned. They are in the process of rebuilding the city of Jerusalem – and the temple still lies in ruins.

Our passage deals with a communal reality – not a personal one. (We need to be careful not to personalize this.) It seems that these people's worship life had become all about them. Isaiah is speaking both about worship and about the practice of fasting that seems to have been a part of the corporate life of these Hebrew people.

Prayer

Sermon

I hope you had a chance to be here Wednesday evening. The soup was outstanding, the bread good, and the fellowship excellent. At one point the conversation at the table I was sitting at turned to what we were giving up for Lent.

One woman was giving up chocolate but was wondering if she shouldn't be giving up complaining. Another was giving up all the sweet treats which she felt was doable. – Another wasn't sure. Maybe you yourself have had this same conversation with others – at home, at work, as you talk to others over the phone. (Do we do that anymore?)

Maybe your Lenten practice is not about what you are giving up – but more about taking something on. Maybe it is being more intentional about prayer, or Bible Study, or worship. I know that I am careful about selecting my devotional reading for Lent. This year I will be working my way through 'Christ of the Celts' by Philip Newell.

My grandma who is 100 will be eating fish during Lent. My grandma is Roman Catholic and somewhere over these last 100 years the practice of refraining from eating meat on Friday's has turned in to the imperative that she is to eat fish on Friday. (It is funny how our practices and traditions take on new meaning over time.)

Where does all this come from? All this 'giving up' and 'taking on' during Lent?

It comes from the practice of 'fasting' – and the understanding that 'fasting' is a spiritual practice that helps us grow in our love of God and possibly even neighbor.

Now let me say a few things about fasting. **First**, fasting normally refers to abstaining from food. At times we might see where one will enter a period of complete fasting – refraining from eating or drinking anything. Many of us have been asked to 'fast' before going to the doctor's office for this test or that test.

Second, fasting has physical implications (much like dieting) and it also has spiritual implications. (Sometimes in Lent we get the two confused as we give up 'treats' but our motivation for that is well 'I need to lose some weight.')

Thirdly, the spiritual practice of fasting is found in all the major world religions – it is not exclusive to the Christian or Jewish faith. Muslim's will fast during Ramadan. The Buddhist will fast in order to 'shake up' or 'invigorate' their spiritual seeking. Hindus will fast in order to make room for spiritual attunement – the harmonizing of the soul and the body.

Remember, for our purpose here ‘fasting’ is the practice of abstaining from food – or food and drink – for spiritual purposes. There is a choice about our fasting. Our ‘fasting’ is meant to awaken us more fully to God’s presence with us – it is meant to bring about gratitude – it is meant to deepen our love for God.

It seems to me – that as we look today at this text from Isaiah – instead of an awakening to God’s presence with us – instead of a practice that was deepening their love for God – these ancient people – found a way to hide in the midst of their ‘piety’ – their religious practice.

It’s not just them – for thousands of years the best place to hide – from God’s transforming and life giving work of the Spirit – the best place to hide – from God’s radical command to love God and to love neighbor – has been the church.

Week after week – we show up on a Sunday morning – or – a Wednesday night – somehow believing that our dutiful act of worship is all that God expects – instead of lives that are transformed.

Week after week – we immerse ourselves in Bible Study – thinking that someday – we will know enough of God to draw close – and we will have our list of things we must do refined – ignoring the fact that God wants not only our heads but our hearts.

Week after week – we give ourselves in prayer – thinking that somehow – if our prayers are fervent enough – or often enough – that will be enough.

Week after week – we But the reality of it is – our acts of piety are just convenient places for us to hide. This is what God’s people have been doing for thousands of years – hiding in their piety.

...day by day they seek me and delight to know my ways... they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to me.

It is not just these ancient people – or even us today – go through the motions (the appearances) of being committed – to the God of Israel – and the person of Jesus Christ – but they and too often we – believe that our devotion – merits some kind of reward – a blessing if you will.

When we come to worship each week – don’t we expect some kind of good in return for our investment. When we pray don’t we expect God to answer that prayer? When we study Bible – don’t we expect the benefit of the wisdom and insight of that endeavor?

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann – in commenting on our text for today – reminds us first that Isaiah’s words to us are to be heard in the context of community. Isaiah is not pointing his finger at this person or that person – he is not shaking his head at you or me – instead he is talking to us – all of us. The sound of the trumpet is the sound at which the community is to gather.

Brueggemannⁱ – points out how the first two verses of our text “*establish the core problem of the community, namely, a hypocritical gap between the actual conduct of the community – and the intention of the community expressed in worship. There is... a deep, dishonest variance between the two, a variance that must be overcome if there is to be well-being in the community.*”

What is true for Isaiah is true for us – the hypocrisy of the church – the disconnect between what we say we are to do and what we do continues to undermine our witness to Jesus Christ.

It is not just Isaiah but it Jesus himself – who deals with the disharmony – between being people who are called to love God – and love neighbor – and people who are loving God and loving their neighbor.

We talk the talk – but we are unwilling – to walk the walk.

The Prophet Isaiah reminds us that God’s people can never become consumed by their own journey, their own need, their own piety – but these practices must become the genesis of lives that reflect the compassion of God for others.

This season of Lent, for us here at Echo Hill, will call us to consider our witness to the watching world. Our Lenten journey will call us to ‘give’ more than give ‘up’.

ⁱ Brueggemann, Walter, Westminster Bible Companion, Isaiah 40-66, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1998, pg. 186f