

March 20, 2011  
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 58:1-12  
Lent 2

### The Fast I Choose: To Act Justly

Once again this morning our reading comes from the Prophet Isaiah. Last week, you will recall, how I told you that the book of Isaiah was most probably written over the course of some 200 years by at least 3 different authors (or Isaiahs).

You will remember, I hope, how in these 200 years those to whom Isaiah writes (the southern part of Israel – Judah – and especially those living in Jerusalem) become a vassal state of the Assyrians, and then are led into exile by the Babylonians, and allowed to return to their cities and homes by the Persians.

It is a tumultuous time in history for these people who God has claimed as his own. In spite of the changes and in spite of the changes of authorship that are represented in this book the main messages of Isaiah remain consistent throughout. (Messages of rebellion against God – idolatry – disobedience and the like – and sin against neighbor.)

One of the most powerful messages of Isaiah is that of God's demand for justice for all people precedes God's desire to be worshipped. This message is prominent as we read the 1<sup>st</sup> Chapter of Isaiah – where the prophet says,

*Hear the word of the Lord,... What to me is the multitude of sacrifices...? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beast; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats...bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to*

*me... Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean ... learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (from Isaiah 1:10-17)*

And it is evident in our reading this morning.

*Is this not the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? ... 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? (from Isaiah 58:5-6)*

### **Prayer of Illumination**

### **Scripture Reading**

### **Sermon**

Alright I want a show of hands, and I want you to be honest. (You are in church after all.) How many of you will be glad to pay \$4.00 for a gallon of gas? How about \$5.00 for a gallon of gas? How about \$7.00.

Now I want you to turn to those around you and I want you to think for a moment about both sides of the issue. Are there some positives to a higher price of gas? What are they? Are there any negatives to a higher price of gas? What are they?

*Let people have a few moments to discuss. Have them share their answers.*

*On the one hand higher gas prices would cause people to quit driving as much, it could curb pollution, spur on new technology, etc. On the other hand higher gas prices hurt the poor and especially the working poor.*

So now I have a follow up question. How many of you would be willing to buy a smaller car that got better gas mileage – willing to walk more or use public transportation – would be willing to give up driving all together – in order to keep gas prices more reasonable for those whose lives are severely affected (bread on the table – milk in the fridge) by the cost of gasoline.

*(Oh, I know what you are thinking – you are thinking I would be willing to do that if I knew that those who needed it were using the money to buy bread and milk and not beer and cigarettes. I would be willing to walk and take public transportation if I knew that what I was doing was putting a roof over some ones head and paying the heating bill in winter.)*

Isaiah says to Judah and to us today, *that the fast (the act of piety) that moves God – is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the ropes that tie people to lives lived in the fear – wondering if they will have enough. – It is to let those who are chained to the powers that seek their own good – free.*

Isaiah says to us that our God is a God who loves justice (61:8) and that acting justly pleases God more than any dutiful acts of piety that we muster.

There are many things that bind us as people, as communities, as nations, and as a global community. We can be bound by the financial realities of life – financial realities that either do or do not allow us to provide the basic needs of food, water, and shelter, of human life.

We might be bound by our ability or our inability. This latest recession showed us that it is not just those who only have basic job skills that can lose their jobs and be unable to find them – but this time a lot of well-educated – middle and upper management people – as well as a host of others lost their jobs.

We might be bound by the realities of health conditions. We might be bound by cultural or political realities – by the way things work – that are outside our control. It is a small thing but just think about how your behavior has changed as you drive along 380 since the red light cameras have been installed.

Take it up a couple notches and we might think about the untouchables in India picking through the garbage dumps – trying to find a way to survive because they have been born into this place in the society in which they live. Think about those who oppose Moammar Gadhafi in Libya fighting in order to survive with everything they can muster because they seek to live in a place where people are treated fairly.

There are many ways in which people are bound to which Isaiah reminds us;

*Is not the fast that I choose (says the Lord) to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.*

I have been thinking all week about a simple way to have us think about justice – about what it means. Much is written about justice – how justice is making sure the right is done and the

wrong is punished in our legal systems desire for ‘justice.’ About how justice is more than legal principle but it is also about benevolence, generosity, compassion toward another.

Today we often refer to this kind of justice as social justice – which has negative connotations for many – who associate social justice with a liberal agenda. In fact we have a name that ties the ideas of compassion and justice together with those who work for it – we call them ‘bleeding heart liberals’ don’t we?

The justice that Isaiah is speaking of today – it has nothing to do with liberal agendas or conservative principles – instead it has to do with the heart of God – God’s compassion for all of humanity. God is the mother – who worries about each of her children – hoping and desiring the best for each one. God is the father – who seeks to protect each of his children – making sure that they have food on the table, a roof over their head, clothes to keep them warm.

In fact Isaiah tells us over and over and over again about God’s heart – God’s compassion for all people and especially the least and the last – the disfranchised – the poor – the widow – societies voiceless.

*How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice...now murderers!  
Everyone loves a bribe and run after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the  
widow’s cause does not come before them (from Isaiah 1:21-23)*

*The Lord of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by  
righteousness. (from Isaiah 5:16)*

And if we have any doubts about the importance of these words in conveying to us the heart of God – let us look at Jesus who – as he begins his earthly ministry – reads from the Isaiah scroll saying,

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

So much for a simple way of talking about justice – right 😊 Let me take another stab at it.

In our home, Donna and I are fortunate to have several spare bedrooms. One of those bedrooms Donna has set up for the grand children. It is a great room. Two beds – one with a Lighting McQueen blanket on it – the other with Dora the Explorer. There are books and blocks, there is a train track and a kitchen cupboard complete with a wide array of pretend foods (which we always eat with gratitude).

Sometimes when the grandkids are playing back there – one or the other will come out with tears in their eyes. When the sobs have settled down – we are able to understand – that some injustice has occurred – a toy has been taken – a precious item not shared.

It seems to me that this is at the heart of what justice is all about – justice is about fairness – it is about everyone having enough of what is necessary. It is about sharing what we have. It is sharing our resources – our food, our money, our medicines, our time. It is sharing the power

that we possess regardless of how much or how little that might seem. It is sharing our kindness, our goodness, and our love.

Paul writes to the churches in Corinth – encouraging them in their offering – for those who are in need in Jerusalem. He reminds the Corinthians as he writes that what he is asking for is a fairness – a balance between the abundance of the Corinthians and the need of those in Jerusalem.

As it is written, Paul says, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

I think this is a great definition of justice – sharing in our abundance so all have enough.

We have all witnessed the events unfolding in Japan since the earthquake and tsunami. While those two combined events have been catastrophic – our attention as a nation has been focused on the nuclear power plant in Fukushima and the 4 nuclear reactors there.

I was watching NBC’s Nightly News on Tuesday night. Brian Williams was reporting on the brisk sales of iodine tablets along the west coast. ‘Many stores have sold out,’ he said. ‘People are scrambling to find them.’ He reported.

Brian called on Dr. Nancy Snyderman – NBC’s resident medical expert and reporter. Dr. Snyderman went through how the iodine tables worked in conjunction with radiation exposure –

she talked about how the iodine blocks the thyroid gland – keeping the harmful radiation from effecting the normal workings of the thyroid.

She then talked about the realities of radiation exposure along the California, Washington, and Oregon coastlines before suggesting the best thing that people could do would be to collect all those iodine tablets and send them to Japan where they could be helpful to people. (STOP)

We have been given so much. To act justly calls us to ‘share’ from the abundance of what God has given us in order that all people might have ‘enough’. – May the fast we chose be that of acting justly. – Amen.