

April 10, 2011
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 58:1-12

The Fast I Choose: To Be Light

I want to remind us as we come to the end of our time with Isaiah today that the context into which the Book of Isaiah speaks – is a world that is dramatically changing. Old power structures have been swept away by the Babylonians, the Assyrians, and the Persians. That which keeps people rooted and grounded in times of great change – house and home, neighbors, cities, towns and religious institutions – all that has been destroyed – people have been uprooted and have taken to foreign lands – asked to learn new ways of living.

It is amazing – when we stop and think about it. How the world has been dramatically changing in just the last several months. Protest in Egypt have overthrown Hosni Mubarak's 30 year reign as President. Civil war has broken out in Libya. A devastating earthquake and tsunami have hit Japan leaving the world focused on the implications of a crippled nuclear power plant that is leaking radiation.

Gas prices have been rising. Food prices have been following right along. A budget impasse has caused our federal government to almost shut down.

But this is nothing new is it? What is it that the wisdom of Ecclesiastes says – 'there is nothing new under the sun, what has been will be and what will be has been.' (Eccl. 1:9 my paraphrase)

We recognize the brokenness of our world today – we know that things aren't as they should be. We recognize the brokenness in the natural disaster that sweeps people off their feet – leaving in its wake the sorrow of death and loss. We recognize the brokenness that exist in the midst of systems and structures that will not allow for those who work to make enough to survive. We recognize the brokenness – of nations that place politics before people – that are self-serving.

We recognize the brokenness in the acts of terrorism – in acts of retaliation – and in acts of war. We recognize the brokenness – that causes people to go hungry, and to be without shelter, and to lack medical care, and to live without hope.

We recognize the brokenness – in others and in ourselves – the sin – the selfishness that is lodged deep within us.

What we need from Isaiah today – is a word of hope – because we recognize the brokenness.

Prayer

Scripture

Well here we are at the end of Lent and for the last 5 weeks we have been spending time with this text from Isaiah 58. How has it been for you spending so much time with Isaiah?

Has Isaiah been like that **rude relative** who is always pointing out your flaws and short comings? Our text from Isaiah has done that questioning our piety – our worship – our prayer –

our Bible Study – our acts of charity. Isaiah has challenged our integrity – uncovered our hypocrisy.

Has it been like an **uninvited guest** that has overstayed their welcome? Our text from Isaiah has pushed our buttons – it has challenged our assumptions – revealing to us – reminding us of God’s heart for the least and the last – for the poor – the outcast – the marginalized. Isaiah has challenged us – asking to share from our abundance.

Has he surprised us, as one person shared on Wednesday night at Bible study, by taking us to some very **deep places**? Our text from Isaiah has called us to move from a ‘fast’ that is about giving up chocolate, or sweets, or pop, to a life that is about ‘self-giving’ for the sake of the other.

Our text has called us to live in neighborly love with the ‘other’ who is closest to us (our own kin) and the other for whom we do not even know (the hungry, homeless poor, naked). It has called us into the deep places of discipleship (of following Jesus) where the living of our lives become an expression of the same kind of sacrificial love that we experience in Jesus’ life and death.

Our text has called us to selfless sharing – because that is what we see in Jesus – God sharing himself freely with us. God sharing with us the fullness of human life. God sharing the good, the bad, and ugly, all the things that we ourselves find in this broken world in which we live.

I have been glad for this time to dwell in this text. What felt like accusation (announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins) and rebuke (will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord) has begun to feel more like a reminder. A reminder about how God created us to live – about how God meant for us to live – in community with one another – sharing from the abundance of God’s providence – making sure that all have enough. And even as I think about the tremendous implications of this kind of ‘radical’ sharing – I have found hope. The book of Isaiah is among other things a book filled with hope. Isaiah paints these beautiful word pictures of a reality that is so much different than the brokenness of the world we know.

- *The peaceable kingdom – where the sword is beat into the plowshare, the spear into the pruning hook – where nation will not make war against nation. (Isaiah 2:) The peaceable kingdom – where the wolf lives with the lamb – the leopard lies down with the goat – the calf and lion dwell together – where hurting and destroying one another is abolished. (Isaiah 11:6-9)*

The book of Isaiah is filled with hope. Hope not just for me and you, not just those who are in and not for those who are out but hope for all people.

- “In the days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains... all the nations shall stream to it ... that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths.” (Isaiah 2:2-3 parts)

The book of Isaiah is filled with hope.

- Healing and restoration – the wilderness and dry land being made glad – the desert rejoicing with the abundance of life blossoming in its midst. A garden well watered overflowing with its beauty and bounty. Life that is grounded in justice and righteousness – compassion and generosity.

The book of Isaiah is filled with hope as it points us to the coming of Jesus.

- *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, ... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:2a,6)*
- *Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; ...he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5)*

Yes – I am glad for a word of hope from Isaiah. But you know what I realize – after spending five weeks in this text about trumpets sounding, and keeping the fast, about sharing our bread, our homes, our selves – what I realize is that God places his hope in us. We are the answer to the brokenness in the world. We, in self-less sharing are the key to healing.

Isn't Isaiah saying that 'if' we do justice, 'if' we free the oppressed, 'if' we lay aside our self-interest, 'if' we share our bread, 'if' we open our home to the homeless, 'if' we cloth the naked, 'if' we do not hide from our kin, 'if' we quit pointing our finger – accusing everyone for everything while refusing to take responsibility ourselves – 'if' we.....

Then we will – our light will break forth like the dawn – and our healing shall spring up quickly.

It seems to me that while we look to God for our hope – God looks to us to be hope in the midst of our broken world.

Philip Newell, in his book *Christ of the Celts* writes:

...There are certain brokennesses in our lives and relationships and world that will not be healed until we are all healed. We are so deeply part of one another, and of all things that it is meaningless to speak about wholeness in separation. (p109) J. Philip Newell, Christ of the Celts.

Is it true that we are so deeply part of one another – God a part of us and us a part of God. God with us and us with one another.

Newell goes on to say:

Wholeness comes in relationship, not in fragmentation. Until we move together again in harmony with the hymn of the universe, our songs of salvation will sound like broken cadences torn from the whole. (p110)

Our witness to the God of hope in the midst of a broken world – Our witness to the Jesus who comes to heal our brokenness – in compassion – in self giving love – in forgiveness – a life of sharing – a death of self-less love. It is not in what we say – it is not in what we do - in our acts of piety that are self-serving. It is in what we do that is self-less and recalls our created goodness. It is in our sharing with others that our light breaks forth.

In the course of these last 5 weeks I have asked you to consider many things. Would you change the ways you get around – walking more, car pooling more, taking public transportation, driving less – in order that gas prices might be kept lower for those who can least afford the rise?

I have asked you if you would be willing to forgo a flood wall and if you would be willing to write a letter to your congressman or senator asking for a reprioritization of the budget that would address hunger and food security issues around the world. I have asked you to think about the root causes of homelessness and invited you to attend a poverty workshop, to be a part of Family Promise, and to make a visit to the Ecumenical Center to learn about the work of agencies like 'Helping Hands'.

Things like these will be the ways that we become hope to the nations – hope to our broken world.

These are the ways that we will allow our light to shine. And that is what we are called to do in Jesus Christ.

You are the light of the world. ... In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:14a,16)