

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Eve of the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany • February 8, 2020

Isaiah 58:1-12 • Psalm 112:1-10 • 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 • Matthew 5:13-20

We often talk about the Bible as a book. We call it “the good book.” We track it on bestseller lists next to *American Dirt*. But the Bible is actually a whole bunch of books. The word Bible comes from the Latin word *biblia*. Like bibliography or Bibliotheque. It’s the sixty-six books that are approved to be read during worship. So the Bible is kind of like an anthology. It’s a collection of things that were put together by people long after the texts themselves were written.

But even that isn’t quite right. Because some of those sixty-six books are actually made up of multiple books that were put together. 2 Corinthians is a good example of this. Many scholars think that it’s actually multiple letters that are stitched together into one book. You can tell because the grammar and tone change very abruptly halfway through. And today we heard from another one of those composite books, which is Isaiah.

Isaiah tells the story of Israel’s exile from their homeland from three different angles. First Isaiah, which is the majority of the book, focuses mostly on prophecies about the impending exile. The Israelites are living amidst massive income inequality and greed and indifference toward the poor, and Isaiah reminds them that their actions have consequences. Deutero-Isaiah focuses mostly on the promise of restoration. Now that they’ve been deported, Isaiah holds out hope that the covenant with God still exists. And Trito-Isaiah, which we heard from today, focuses mostly on the experiences of repatriation. The Babylonians are conquered by the Persians and their King Cyrus. And when Cyrus sees all these Israelites living in Babylon he says, “I don’t want to be responsible for all these people,” you can go back home. And so these deported Israelites pack up and head back west.

That’s the context for today’s reading. The Israelites go home, they repatriate, they get to do the thing they’ve always wanted to do, and it turns out to be really complicated. The temple is gone. Jerusalem is in ruins. The old communities are all torn apart. And so the people assume this must be the result of some divine punishment. God is still angry about what happened before the exile, so they think maybe they can make things better by fasting. They think that God will look favorably on you if you put on sackcloth and stop eating, you’ll make God less angry, so that’s what the people do. They go through this elaborate ritual and hope that God will see this ritual and say, “Oh. I guess they’re really serious about feeling bad. So I should stop giving them a hard time.” And do things change? No. Of course not.

So today’s reading is a conversation between God and Isaiah about this fasting ritual. God calls Isaiah and says, “Shout out, do not hold back! Life up your voice like a trumpet!” So this is God calling Isaiah over and saying, “I need you to go talk to the Israelites.” And then God describes the situation from the divine point of view. The Israelites say, “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” We do the ritual, we do the fasting, we do the whole thing, and nothing changes.

And how does God respond? “Look, you serve only your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers... you fast only to quarrel and to fight to strike with a wicked fist.” In other words, your fast is not actually changing anything. You fast all day, but do you do anything with the food you’re not eating? No. You just save it for tomorrow. You fast all day, but do you treat your workers better? No. You treat them just the same. You fast all day, but do you treat your neighbors better? No. You argue with them just like every other day.

And if you know the history, if you have that three book schema in your mind, you can see part of Isaiah’s argument unspooling. God is saying that the Israelites are doing the same things that

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your ancestors did that forced them to go into exile. In Isaiah's mind, the people went into exile because they didn't honor their covenant with God, they didn't seek the welfare of their neighbors. And now that they've gone through this exile experience and come home, they're doing the same thing all over again.

So what God critiques here is ritual. But more than that, a certain kind of ritual. A ritual which does nothing to help anyone besides the ego of the person doing it. Does this prayer and fasting actually make anything better? No. It's all about this one individual person trying to get squared up with God so that things get better for themselves. Everyone complains that God isn't doing enough for them while they don't do anything for the people around them.

We probably don't put on sackcloth and few of us actually fast. But we engage in those same sort of self-serving rituals that are more about communicating something about ourselves than actually doing anything useful. The most insidious version of this is our constant turning to thoughts and prayers after some act of violence. Is there anything wrong with thoughts and prayers? No. Of course not. The problem is that they often get used to deflect from meaningful action.

Our culture has a sort of Christian Outrage Industrial Complex that gets offended by people taking religious language out of the public sphere. (Think cashiers wishing you Happy Holidays instead of Merry Christmas and statues of the Ten Commandments being removed from court houses.) But what should actually give us concern, maybe even offend us, is not the removal of religious language, but the misappropriation of it by people who hold positions of public trust. The next time we have a mass shooting in this country, watch how the language of prayer gets used as a smokescreen to protect people from taking action. You can even take today's reading and replace "fasting" with "thoughts and prayers" and get the same basic idea. God said, "Look, you serve only your own interest by your praying."

God offers the Israelites something better. God says there's nothing wrong with fasting. The problem is that you're not fasting the right way. Fasting isn't just about not eating and putting on sackcloth and wallowing around so other people see how pious you are. God says, "The fast that I choose is to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke." God's fast is to "share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, and to cover those who are naked." That's a fast that actually does something good for your neighbor.

So you can see that the problem here really isn't about fasting. It's about how you think God is active in the world. The Israelites think that God is just like another actor, another force in the world. And you have to cajole God down from heaven to intervene if things are going to get better. Isaiah imagines it differently. How does Isaiah put it? "If you remove the yoke from among you, the point of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted... the LORD will guide you continually."

When we ask why God allows something to happen, God responds, "Don't ask me. Why do you allow this to happen?" The problem is less about why God allows suffering and evil than it is why we allow suffering and evil. And Isaiah's answer probably still holds true for us. It's just easier. It's comfortable. It's the way we've always done things. Things can't get better as long as you serve your own interest. Things can't get better as long as you strike with a wicked fist.

But there's also a more positive vision here, too. Which is that we don't have to wait in sackcloth or sit on our hands for things to be perfect. When you are in a situation that seems morally complicated, when you think the world needs to drastically improve in some way, don't sit on your hands or wallow around in sackcloth waiting for God to fix it. Get involved. Take your sacred best guess.¹

¹ https://www.centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/detail/a-journey-to-faith-needing-god_rosh-hashanah-5772

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It's easy to feel powerless, like you can't make a difference. That's certainly what the profiles in cowardice who constantly invoke thoughts and prayers want you to think. But God says that you have more agency, more power, more influence than they say. If you trust God's promise to work in and through us, a new world is possible. Isaiah puts it beautifully. If you trust the LORD, "your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt... and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

That's how the kingdom of God gets built. Not by making things so bad that God has to intervene but by trusting that God's promise comes to fruition in and through us. Brick by brick. Foundation by foundation. Bridge by bridge.

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