

Sermon Isaiah 58 August 21, 2016

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I Am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on My holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Isaiah 58:9-14

I chose this morning's scripture because of the beautiful images of a watered garden and a life-giving stream... so appropriate on a day when we celebrate the sacrament of baptism. This prophecy from Isaiah begins with the blowing of a horn [blow horn] to summon God's people, and then Isaiah tells them that worship and fasting are hollow actions when not accompanied by help and compassion for those in need. Earlier in this chapter of Isaiah God says this about soulless religion: "The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit. You drive your employees much too hard. You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight. You fast, but you swing a mean fist. The kind of fasting you do won't get your prayers off the ground. Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after: a day to show off humility? To put on a pious long face and parade around solemnly in black? Do you call *that* fasting, a fast day that I, God, would like? This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your home, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families. Do this and...

righteousness will pave your way. The God of glory will secure your passage. Then when you pray, God will answer. You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I Am.'

Throughout scripture water is significant: a sacred gift, and a sign of God's presence. Jesus called Himself "living water." Many of us have grown up thinking that water was an inexhaustible resource... and after five years of drought in our state... and devastating droughts in other places in the world like Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, India, China, and Pakistan, among other places, we now know that water is a precious resource... a sacred gift. We can't take it for granted.

Throughout our history as God's people, the bible tells us that all of us have taken God for granted. We have shown up - not just in the congregation but to spend time with God, to listen to God - only when we felt like it, when it was convenient for us, or when we were worried or afraid. This is our history, our human frailty and faithlessness recorded in the bible and... in our own lives. Throughout history we have called on God to come to our aid, to save us from trouble, to rescue us from disaster... but we have not been faithful to God as God is faithful to us. The bible is clear that God is a lover ~ God loves us unconditionally and forever, because that's who God is. But God wants something from us... God wants love in return. Love for God, and love for others: those who are in trouble, and suffering, and without the resources we have.

Jesus knew and quoted Isaiah, and he echoes Isaiah's prophecy when He told the disciples, "Your love (your compassion, care, hands-on-help) for one another will prove to the world that you are My disciples." Isaiah told the people that their worship was empty, and their fasting meaningless, because it wasn't done with mindfulness and compassion for others, with concern for those in need.

But God (and the prophets) don't just show up to give a disappointing report card to God's people. God shows up, and God sends prophets, to offer us mercy, and the opportunity to repent, and to have our lives transformed into lives of love and holiness. When we turn to God - obeying what God says is the most important way to live - to "Love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy, and love others as well as you love yourself," then, God says, (this is Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Isaiah 58) "I will always show you where to go. I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places... You'll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry. You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again."

Isn't that a glorious image, and an amazing promise, that God will make us well-watered gardens, springs that never run dry, and fixers and healers of what's been broken and damaged? That's a different picture of the church than we might have had in the past. Many of us grew up in a time when it was expected that good people went to church. (And coming to church is a good thing!) We gather here in God's presence and expect to meet God. Our own faith encourages and influences each other's. We breathe in holiness here... wherever we are gathered to love and worship God... wherever we are intentional about listening to and obeying God. Here we remember that Jesus didn't say: I am with you "if" you gather... He said: I am with you 'when' you gather. So we need to anticipate encountering and experiencing Jesus Christ in our midst when we gather, to meet the God of Isaiah who stated so clearly what God's expectations of us are. Worship, prayer, singing, reading scripture, quiet devotion... all

are good ways to experience God's grace. But on its own the means of grace are like breathing in. Only breathing in, and not out again. Breathing out is expressing God's love (that is, care, compassion, justice, and mercy) to the world... to those in need. Breathing out is as vital to the spiritual life as it is to physical life. Isaiah preached about a vital and holy life that is both love of God and love for others.

I researched the expression "preaching to the choir" and this is what I found: "Preaching to the choir clearly refers to the pointlessness of a preacher attempting to convert those who, by their presence in church, have already demonstrated their faith. The idea has also been expressed in another phrase that refers to an unnecessary act, that is, 'kicking at an open door.'" It often occurs to me that I preach to the choir... you are already people of faith who demonstrate the breathing in (love of God) and breathing out (compassion and justice) of the Christian life.

I wonder if there's more... I wonder if we did these exercises - these spiritual practices of loving God with everything in us, and loving others as well as love ourselves - more consistently, and more intentionally, if we'd see in our midst, and in ourselves, what Isaiah prophesized about... the image God gave him of faithful people of a spring whose waters never fail. [I want us to read this together... this image God has for us. In the bulletin on page 4 is our scripture. In the middle it starts with the words "The Lord will guide you continually" and ends with "the restorer of streets to live in." Let's read that together.]

That image God has for us... is worth practicing and praying for, and something we can offer our neighbors, the people right outside our doors: that here they can find a flowing spring of love and welcome and meaning for their lives; that here we are

builders and repairers of brokenness and hopelessness and injustice; that we are working together for the coming Kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven.

This morning we baptized Zoe Lewis and in these waters of baptism, we too have died to sin and alienation from God, and we have been raised up with Christ. Isaiah has a message for us this morning, that we are not to take this sacrament... the sacrament of baptism, and the sacrament of life, for granted. But we are to be lovers of God and lovers of humanity. We are to worship God, and we are to let worship change us into God's agents of love and hope and peace.

For the gift of water... for the gifts of these baptismal waters... and for Your presence with us, we give You thanks and praise, O God. Let God's people say: Amen.