

Year A

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

**Isaiah 58:1-12**

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.

<sup>2</sup> Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgements,  
they delight to draw near to God.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’  
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,  
and oppress all your workers.

<sup>4</sup> Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.

<sup>5</sup> Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?

<sup>6</sup> 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?

<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

<sup>8</sup> Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.  
<sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
<sup>10</sup> 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.  
<sup>11</sup> 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.  
<sup>12</sup> 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.

### **Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21**

#### *Concerning Almsgiving*

‘Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup> ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

#### *Concerning Prayer*

<sup>5</sup> ‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

#### *Concerning Fasting*

<sup>16</sup> ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

*Concerning Treasures*

19 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Fast That God Chooses

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

It is good to be with you.

The United Church of Christ, our church's denomination, has as its motto the quote from the Gospel of John, "That They May All Be One." I think it is good when we drop our walls and worship together. It looks a little closer to what I think God hopes for us as a community.

And that is where we've been, those of us following the lectionary these last weeks, and meditating on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, is it not? Meditating on God's vision for divine community right here on earth.

At the threshold of Lent, when we are reminded of our mortality, as we prepare to step into the wilderness to journey alongside Jesus to the cross, these scriptures remind us how we are to journey. This is really a "how-to" do Lent.

Some of us will give up chocolate, or wine, or carbs, or some other such thing that we as Americans like to sub in for "sin." Others of us will take a social media fast, in an effort to reconnect with God. And while these practices might remind us of what hardship Jesus is about to go through, I think the scriptures suggests a different kind of fast altogether.

The prophet Isaiah is clear about what God wants and doesn't want from us. In addressing the people's confusion about how they might gain God's attention, he says:

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.<sup>1</sup>

The prophet explains that these acts of devotion are hollow if on the same day that we are fasting, we serve only our own interests, pick fights, and oppress our workers. If we are acting that way, God will certainly not take notice of our religious observances.

Jesus builds on these teachings when he preaches:

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 58:3-4

‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do... so that they may be praised by others.’<sup>2</sup>

...’And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray... so that they may be seen by others.’<sup>3</sup>

...’And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.’<sup>4</sup>

Jesus neither wants us to walk around letting everyone know exactly how “humble” we are, or to have a misery-fest where everyone competes to say exactly how much we’re suffering for God or the good of the cause.

Listen instead to what God declares through Isaiah:

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? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?<sup>5</sup>

Piety, without action that arises from faith, will get us nowhere. Caring for the least of these will. Or as one writer characterizes it:

The root problem is people who observe spiritual disciplines for selfish reasons (to gain God’s blessings) while ignoring the hunger, poverty, homelessness, and nakedness of those in need.

The root solution is true devotion to God, which grows naturally out of love for God. People who love God will worship [God] for the sake of honoring rather than manipulating [God].<sup>6</sup>

Jesus preaches:

‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:2

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:5

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:16

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 58:6-7

<sup>6</sup> “Isaiah 58:1-14 Commentary,” *Sermon Writer*, n.d., accessed February 7, 2020, <https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/isaiah-581-14-commentary/>.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:19-21

Between Isaiah and Jesus, we are to understand, contrary to the Roman Empire, and contrary to all society would have us think, we are to work for the realization of God's vision for us all. This looks like a:

community marked by justice, transformed social relationships, practices of piety, and shared and accessible resources. Life under Rome's imperial rule with vast discrepancies of wealth and much injustice is not God's will.<sup>8</sup>

And if we create such a righteous community as God envisions, why then, Isaiah proclaims:

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and [God] will say, Here I am.<sup>9</sup>

This, Beloved, is what are called to be as disciples. If we understand that true piety is doing God's work in the world, then we shine God's light to all who need it. Being God's light doesn't always mean we will be the most popular or powerful. But it does mean that shining that light of truth, hope, and blessing will in itself inspire others to do the same.

What does that mean, in the here and now? It means be your authentic, God-given self. Warts and all. Not the insta-, facebook, ready-self. Not the #blessed self. Not the perfect mom, glowing in makeup as you make breakfast and take out the garbage, or the guy with the best car, or even the one carrying the most chairs setting up for Easter breakfast if you're doing just to look good and strong. ☺ These things keep us addicted to the power that the world would give, not the power that God gives. That's not what Jesus means when he tells us:

'[W]hen you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Parent in Heaven... who sees in secret will reward you.'<sup>10</sup>

We are asked to pray, to fast, to give privately so that we grow our relationship with God for the right reasons. So I'm not saying, "Don't give up your chocolate, your wine, your beer, your carbs, your social media" this Lent, but I am saying, whatever you put down, take up something else instead that strengthens your discipleship: prayer, or a practice of reconnection with God.

Think about it. This Lenten practice is a time of walking in wilderness. It is a wild and desolate time. It is a come-out-of-Egypt time. It is a John-the-Baptist time, he who supped on locusts and honey. It is a get-in-the-river baptism time. It is a walk-with-Jesus time, who from the wet of the river, with the beloved voice of God echoing in his ears, journeys into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil to test his commission by God.

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<sup>8</sup> Warren Carter, "Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1754.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 58:7-9

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 6:17-18

Isn't that how it goes, y'all? This Jesus business isn't all roses. We are told we are beloved. We are told we are blessed. We are called. We say our yes. And then the devil just shows up with the very obstacles that could derail us from God's path. This way is not easy. Jesus' path leads straight into that which would try with all the tempter's might to lead us astray. Bread from stone. Daring the angels and God Godself. All the kingdoms and wealth of the world. And to it all, Jesus said no. Forty days and forty nights of temptation. Forty days and forty nights of fasting. Forty days and forty nights to say, in the face of it all, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God."<sup>11</sup> This is a wilderness road that if we follow it, leads straight to God. There's an old spiritual that goes:

Tell me, how did you feel when you come,  
come out the wilderness, leaning on the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

Musical historians explaining the hymn write:

"The words of the refrain, 'leaning on the Lord,' come... from the preaching of Nat Turner, the mystic who, like John the Baptist, was 'preaching in the wilderness.'"<sup>13</sup> Turner in 1831 led a slave rebellion in Southampton, Virginia.

... Stanza two asks: "Did you love everybody?" Stanza three asks: "Did your soul feel happy?" Both questions imply that the wilderness was a conversion experience, where one would turn away from sin and love one's neighbor after "coming out" the wilderness.

William B. McClain speaks about the dualism of the spiritual. Is it possible that the "wilderness" is a place of refuge?<sup>14</sup>

This one song and its history suggests that the wilderness can lead to rebellion in the name of justice. It can lead to loving folks more fully in the name of God. It can lead to a soul bursting with joy. Y'all, whatever your Lenten practice is, I ask you: How will you feel when you come out the wilderness? Please consider a practice so deep that it makes you consider how God would have us order the world and treat each other. Let it be a refuge from all the world would tell us is important. That's what's at the heart of Isaiah's and Jesus' instructions to us today—let it all be for God, not self-serving. They are saying, "Stop looking around and comparing yourself to everybody else! Look to God!"

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>12</sup> "Come Out the Wilderness," *Hymnary.Org*, accessed February 25, 2020, [https://hymnary.org/text/tell\\_me\\_how\\_did\\_you\\_feel\\_when\\_you\\_come](https://hymnary.org/text/tell_me_how_did_you_feel_when_you_come).

<sup>13</sup> Carlton R. Young, *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Abingdon Press, 1993), accessed February 25, 2020, <https://www.cokesbury.com/9781426756801-Companion-to-the-United-Methodist-Hymnal> in; Darnell St. Romain, "History of Hymns: 'Come Out the Wilderness,'" *Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church*, February 2017, accessed February 25, 2020, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-come-out-the-wilderness>.

<sup>14</sup> St. Romain, "History of Hymns."

Y'all, what I'm trying to tell you is this: I think God is telling us to be messy. If you're worried about how you look to others when you fast, you will not reach the heart of what God is hoping for you in that practice. And don't you know, the world doesn't need more "perfect" church people. It doesn't need more facades of everything being "just fine." The world needs more Jesus-people. The kind who will eat with those the rest of the world deems unworthy. The kind who have faith that there will be enough and are willing to share it. The kind who are willing to pray quietly because they truly trust God. The kind who are willing to admit that they, too, wrestle with the devil.

As I contemplate this, I want you to know that my prayer and listening doesn't look like me kneeling in a sunbeam in front of a window. It usually looks like wandering in the woods or walking on the beach, if I can get home to Charleston, where I grew up. If I'm lucky, when I'm down there, I'll see a dolphin. But often it's just raining and grey. And yet, as I walk, I pray. I listen for where God would have me go in life. The mist in the air is salty, and it reminds me of all God has ever called me to be, which is not picture-perfect. And sometimes God calls me not to where or how I want to go, but where I am needed most.

Which meant, despite my call to ministry at a young age, going in the opposite direction. And yet by following my passions for working at the intersections of culture, land, and spirituality, it led me right back into ministry. Jan Richardson writes, "[P]erhaps far more often than we think, God works within our desires. ... Oftentimes a yearning lies buried beneath or within the initial desire,"<sup>15</sup> and it's not until we examine it through prayer that we might be able to see how God's desires are at work within our own. How about you? What are you meant to do? What has God put on your heart? And what are we meant to do together as a community?

I bet it looks like, perhaps not bringing the homeless into our homes, because times have changed since Isaiah's time, and someone who has worked as a homelessness chaplain, I can tell you it's not necessarily safe to bring people home, but that doesn't mean we don't help in other ways or work to make sure there is a shelter where people can go. It might look like, in this community, making sure that the redevelopment of West Southern Pines benefits everyone and doesn't push the historic black community out of their homes. It means that we put an end to the meaning of "good schools" and "bad schools" because we've worked hard to make sure that all schools offer the best for our young people. It means we stop demonizing those who look, think, vote, and act differently than us. Because those actions dim our God-given light, and, y'all, are we not called to be salt and light? It means we instead have to come together in worship services like these and to work for the good of all in our community on things like the Habitat Faith Build and to support The Coalition so that all might have enough.

We shine for the glory of God, not our individual glory. All that we do points back to the abundance and mercy of God. This is where those who are entrapped by power and needing to look good fail. None of us are exempt from these journeys through the wilderness or the call to work together for the reign of God here on earth. But as certainly as Jesus made it through, so will we, and when we come out the wilderness, will we not be ready to join together just a little

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<sup>15</sup> Jan L. Richardson, *In the Sanctuary of Women: A Companion for Reflection and Prayer*, 42495th edition. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 31.

better for the reign of God here on earth? I pray that it may be so. Mess and all, joy and all, love of God, and all. Because that's how we build the beloved community—not to strive to be individually good people, but to be a people.<sup>16</sup> God's people.

Amen.

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<sup>16</sup> Sandhya Jha, "Liberating Love Devotion for February 23 ,

*Liberating Love*, last modified February 23, 2020, accessed February 25, 2020, <https://mailchi.mp/cf0ca3de3984/liberating-love-devotion-for-february-23?fbclid=IwAR2SBxYM-UH4fVHkDnPDheBD2t7Ze8-YTcnR5ZTAFV-Un-wEXClhXa0r0IU>.