



# Tecumseh United Methodist Church

Christ's compassionate community in Tecumseh;  
Loving and serving prayerfully and unconditionally

## Sunday, March 15, 2020

### Today's Bible Reading: Isaiah 58:5-9a

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Is this the kind of fast I choose,  
a day of self-affliction,  
of bending one's head like a reed  
and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes?

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

Isn't this the fast that I choose:  
releasing the wicked restraints,  
untying the ropes of a yoke,  
setting free the mistreated,  
and breaking every yoke?

Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry  
and bringing the homeless poor into your house,  
covering the naked when you see them,  
and not hiding from your own family?

Then your light will break out like the dawn,  
and you will be healed quickly.

Your own righteousness will walk before you,  
and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard.

Then you will call,  
and the Lord will answer;  
you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here."

## Reflection

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This **is not** the fast that I choose – fasting from worship and the gathering of our church community. I would have given up pizza, even with anchovies, but not this! Alas, we live in interesting times and the spread of the Coronavirus with the threat of COVID-19 being contracted by anyone in our generally well-aged congregation justifies not gathering together (being a germ-factory is not restricted to the young).

Having denied ourselves the experience of gathering for worship (and a tasty soup and salad lunch afterward), evokes the concept of **fasting**, especially since we are in the middle of Lent. Of course, we are breaking a couple of the rules of fasting during Lent. One should not abstain from worship nor even food, as Sundays in Lent are excluded from the season's self-denial (each Sunday is a little "Resurrection Day," thus a feast day). Yet even our violation of the rules of Lenten fasting serve the purpose of enlightening and expanding our understanding of fasting as a **spiritual discipline**.

As a people of God, we have practiced fasting for a very long time. Our spiritual ancestor Israelites fasted during times of crisis, both personal and communal. They even went as far as to assign one day during the year as a national day of fasting—the Day of Atonement. Jesus mentions fasting several times, most notably in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, where he warns against parading oneself around looking disheveled and miserable in order to show one's piety through their fasting. Instead, one's fast should be a private act of devotion to God (Matthew 6:16-18). And, although Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days before being tested by Satan's temptations (Matthew 4:1-11), the recommended practice was to fast for only a day, allowing the drinking of water if needed. Fasting was a spiritual practice, not an endurance test.

It was not long after Christ's resurrection and ascension that fasting was tweaked and twisted. The early desert hermits in Egypt—Christianity's first monks—would undergo severe deprivation as they squirreled away by themselves for weeks at a time, coming together periodically for a real meal before disappearing back into the desert to give all their time to their prayers. In the Middle Ages, fasting was "enhanced" by mortification of the flesh, an academic (albeit creepy)

phrase meaning self-torture. Extreme fasting coupled with painful practices such as self-flagellation were thought to bring one closer to Christ by joining in his suffering. I suspect that the stress, dangerous infections, and most likely shorter lifespans were not what the pious monks were trying to accomplish but experienced anyway.

Today, we have taken fasting to the other end of the pendulum swing. Whereas the ancient Israelite would fast by wearing a scratchy camel's hair sackcloth (think burlap), dumping ashes over their head, and abstaining from food for a day, we give up chocolate and maybe meat on Fridays, all in comfortable clothes. Without a doubt we do not want to return to the self-injurious practices of the early monks. However, fasting for many is a hollow gesture. Can we reclaim fasting as a practice that grows or nurtures us spiritually? I think we can, and the above passage from Isaiah 58 might help.

As background, the book of Isaiah is really three writings that span several centuries. The first Isaiah, that which we attribute to the actual prophet Isaiah, is chapters one through 39 and was written before the Assyrian Empire destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. Oversimplified and reduced down one sentence, it reads, "Because of your faithlessness toward God, you're all cruisin' for a bruise". Second Isaiah, chapters 40 through 54, appears to have been written during the Babylonian Captivity of the kingdom of Judah, following its destruction by the Neo-Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, who hauled the best and brightest off to Babylon. It displays hope for the future. Third Isaiah, chapters 55 through 66, was a product of the Restoration period following the return of the Israelites in Babylon to the Palestine region by the Persians (who, according to the Bible, gave the Babylonians a divine comeuppance). It is more celebratory with God's word to the former exiles as to how to get their nation back on its feet and be the faithful people of God they were meant to be.

The Restoration period was a tough time with serious challenges socially, economically, and politically. Rebuilding a decimated nation's social fabric, systems of commerce and trade, and governmental function takes a lot of work and did not happen quickly. It was even a struggle to get their religion back in order.

Isaiah 58 gives us a glimpse into this world. In verses before the reading above, the people had been complaining because they were fasting in order to curry God's favor so that God might better their

situation. They observed the forms of religious practice—abstinence and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes—yet God seemed to be ignoring their religiosity. What was the point of fasting if God was not going to do anything helpful in response? Our passage above answers this question by offering a new way to think about the practice of fasting.

The reason the Israelites' fasting was ignored comes as an indictment against them in those early verses of chapter 58. They were fasting with all due religiosity but beyond that they were failing to observe the Sabbath, those in charge of workers were abusing them, and they quarreled with each other, sometimes violently. In other words, outside of their observance of the ritual of fasting, they were behaving badly, violating the morality that God had asked of them. Thus the rhetorical question: "Okay, you're performing the fasting ritual . . . so what! Do you think this is how God wants you to use fasting to demonstrate your devotion?"

Over the years, God's people had forgotten what it meant to be God's people and to hold to God's values and saving purpose. And as so often happens in religion, their religion became superficial, devolving into a legalism that adhered to religious forms without substance. They did the right ritual stuff without their heart's understanding as to what it meant. They fasted properly yet were unaware that they were violating the penitential nature of fasting by continuing in their wrongdoing. Thus, as with all superficial religiosity, their fasting meant nothing. I can only just imagine God's heartbreak and frustration.

So when God speaks through the prophet, God calls out his people: "Is this the kind of fast that I choose!?! A show of hollow religion!?! Give me a break! . . . Listen! And learn! . . ."

Fasting for the sole purpose of fulfilling the letter of a religious obligation has never been very meaningful. Giving up something just to say you have done so is neither impressive nor spiritually enriching. Instead, fasting is about what we do with the space opened vacated by giving something else up. Fasting from food for a day **provides time** for prayer or Bible reading or something else useful that had been taken up by meal preparation, eating, and cleaning up afterward.

The writer of Isaiah 58 takes this to yet another level. Fasting is about self-denial and penitential abstinence, but abstinence from injustice; abstinence from wrongdoing; abstinence from the attitudes and behaviors that had been so offensive to God that religious ritual itself became distasteful in God's eyes.

“Isn't this the fast that I choose: . . .” – to bring on justice where there is need for justice; to see to the basic needs of people in need (the hungry, homeless, and naked); to treat our own families decently. Put another way, until what is right, just, and needed is done, the religiosity of a fast—or any other religious ritual—is worthless. God wants us to avoid harm and do good even before we focus on our worship and religion.

Religious ritual and spiritual disciplines and practices—from prayer to worship to Bible reading and participating in baptism and Lord's supper—are important ways we stay connected with God and build ourselves into the community we call the Church. But those things come **after** we have turned from doing harm and started to do the good we have been neglecting. God's heart is fixed on loving people and if we have learned anything from Jesus while he was among us it is that, along with loving God, our hearts must too be fixed on loving others. Only then does our religious observance truly honor God.

If you intend to fast during Lent, enjoy your chocolate and I will enjoy my anchovy pizza. Instead let our fast be to abstain from doing harm, fill that space with doing good, and always stay in love with God and others.

. . . Pastor Mark