

The Temptation of Fasting
Isaiah 58:1-12
February 17, 2013

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Grace, mercy, and peace from the one, who denied himself for us, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the day that marks the forty-day period we call Lent. Throughout the ages, it has been the practice of many Christians to fast during Lent. In other words, they deny themselves something during Lent to keep themselves mindful of how much Christ denied himself for us. That being the case, today we turn to Isaiah in order to gain a Godly perspective on fasting.

As you read the book of Isaiah, you notice that Isaiah used different words to get the attention of the different people for whom he had a message from God. When he spoke to the house of Judah and the Gentiles, he said, "Listen." When he spoke to Jerusalem, he shouted, "Awake!" For the remnant in exile in Babylon, he said, "Sing."

In the text, Isaiah is speaking to the priests and his attention-grabbing word is very dramatic. God tells Isaiah: *Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet* (Is

Picture this – a large crowd of Jews coming together for the day of atonement, when the people were to fast as preparation for cleansing from sin. It was in the midst of this pious gathering that God told Isaiah to stand up and shout at the top of his voice: *Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins* (Is 58:1b NIV).

Can't you just see their faces? First, who would expect someone to start shouting at such a solemn event? Second, how could God have anything against the Israelites when they daily sought God through their finely honed religious rituals?

If anything, they didn't think God should have a complaint with them, but they should have a complaint against God. Listen to verse three: *Why have we fasted, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?*

Their questions reveal the motive for their rituals. They pretend to be a righteous nation, true to the Law of God, and seeking his wisdom for doing justice among the people. But in truth, they were using their daily rituals to draw God's attention to themselves and receive his blessing on their piety.

Religious rituals at a national level always run the risk of becoming civil substitutes for true obedience to God's Word. The United States has many residual rituals of the nation that was founded on trust in God. The President is sworn in with his hand on the Holy Bible. Congress opens each session with a prayer of invocation – a prayer asking God to be present at their proceedings. The Supreme Court is brought to order with the words, "God bless the United States and this honorable court."

We pray that we never lose these rituals that remind us of our founding principles, but at the same time, we must never pretend that these rituals sanctify this nation or purify its people. At best, a ritual is only an open conduit through which the grace of God can flow to save the nation and redeem its people.

Through Isaiah's shouts, God brings the pious rituals of Israel to a moment of truth. Contrary to what those people think, God says that he has a few things against them: *Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers* (Is 58:3b NIV).

To begin with, on the same day they fast they indulge themselves in pleasure. You might compare these people with the revelers on Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) in New Orleans. They party until they drop because the next day is Ash Wednesday and they feel they must then repent of their sins.

Furthermore, God expects a profession of personal righteousness, personal piety, to lead to social justice. To deny themselves by fasting to cleanse themselves from sin, while at the same time exploiting their employees, is a contradiction that is offensive to God.

The charges continue: *Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists* (Is58:4a NIV). Why were they fighting? Their fasting was really an attempt to prove who was the holiest of all. They fought as fasting led to hunger, hunger led to irritability, and each wanted to claim himself more holy than another.

However, God intends for the spiritual disciplines of his people to lead to unity and productivity not physical violence. So, the ritualists of Israel struggled and fought with each other to show who was the most God-fearing and pious. But, in reality, they were just a bunch of mean-spirited, self-centered people. And God had a shocking news flash for them: *You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high* (Is 58:4b NIV).

You can't deny the outward show of these ritualists. They denied themselves things, they walked around with their heads bowed down, they even sat in sackcloth and ashes. Yet, God asks a question that puts their piety in perspective: *Is this the kind of fast I have chosen? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?* (Is 58:5 NIV).

Obviously, the answer to God's question is no. These things are not what God wants and they are not acceptable to him. What is acceptable to God? God wants the things he asks for and these things aren't a mystery. God lists them for us. Here are the things that God considers to be acceptable fasting:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Is 58:6-7 NIV).

Jesus said: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* (Lk 4:18-19 NIV). Jesus came to bind up the physical and the spiritual wounds of his people. The essence of Jesus' ministry was liberty. Liberty is the essence of the fasts that God has chosen.

Those who practice an acceptable fast are those who dedicate themselves to a personal righteousness which leads to social justice – the sharing of not only what they have but also what they believe. A true fast will bring goods and services to those without the physical necessities of earthly life, and it will bring the saving Word of God to those without the spiritual necessities of eternal life.

Is there a word for us in what Isaiah had to say to the pietistic ritualists of his day? Yes there is. As we stand here on the threshold of another Lenten Season, we need to examine ourselves and consider making an acceptable fast to the Lord.

It has been my experience that fasting, or giving up something for Lent, isn't a major issue for Lutherans. If that has been your experience also, I want to challenge you to make a Lenten fast this year. I'm not talking about depriving yourself of chocolate or movies. I want you to make a fast that is acceptable to the Lord. Here's how you can do that.

The text tells us to: *share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?* (Is 58: 7 NIV). Look around the Detroit Metro area. Do you see any opportunities to follow these fasting rules? I realize our church collects food and clothing for those in need, but is there more that we can do? Consider all that God has blessed you with. Is there room to make a larger Lenten fast of your time and resources?

Verse six of the reading asks us to fast in a different direction. There we are instructed to: *loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke.* Doing this requires a different kind of fasting. To set this kind of liberty in motion, we need to be taking the Gospel to those who are living in darkness. Chains of injustice and yokes of oppression can only be broken by the love of Christ.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, there is a piety which pleases God and there is a fast that God finds acceptable. However, contrary to the passive denial that the world calls fasting, God's idea of pious fasting calls for action.

Today, I'm calling on you to fast this Lenten Season. I'm asking you to make it your personal responsibility to see to it that the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the homeless are sheltered, and the broken-hearted are comforted. I'm asking you to make it your personal responsibility to see to it that the message of the Gospel is taken to the lost so that the bonds of sin are broken and souls are set free.

I am going to leave you with God's promise to those who honor and obey his Word: *Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I* (Is 58:8-9 NIV).