

So That...
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Isaiah 58:9b-14 NRSV

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.

It's a story we know. God has been loving, instructive and merciful with Israel, giving them blessings, warnings and opportunities on how to do right in the world – toward others and God. History shows us that the people of Israel repeatedly mess this up – “We understand what You ask of us. We want your blessing. Thank You.” They do it for a while, but quickly forget and they find themselves in trouble...again. God passes judgement upon them for their rebellion, but also God provides hope.

God sends the Prophet Isaiah to deliver messages to Israel for their welfare because God IS merciful, God understands humanity's nature, and most importantly God loves them (and us). Through the Prophet Isaiah, God has told them that because of their insurrection, their judgement will be the Assyrian and Babylonian Exiles.

The Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE was the result of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and his soldiers laying siege on Jerusalem and defeating King Jehoiakim and his warriors. The exile involved thousands of people from the southern Kingdom of Judah being sent to and enslaved in Babylon as a punishing payment from King Jehoiakim to King Nebuchadnezzar. This exile occurred for more than 50 years, with Judean laborers routinely being sent to Babylon as slaves.

Left behind in Jerusalem were those who were not good laborers; the elderly, the infirm and also the wealthy elites who could buy their way “out of slavery.” Being left behind wasn't necessarily a great thing, though, because under King Nebuchadnezzar's rule, the city of Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah was pillaged, destroyed and left to rot with no support of any kind.

The Prophet Isaiah also offered God's message of hope though; a promise that they would return from exile to Jerusalem to re-establish their place and share the Kingdom of God. That prophetic hope came true when the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, defeated King Nebuchadnezzar and was gracious enough to allow the exiled Judeans to return home.

The exiled Judeans are now home, reunited with those left behind, living in a destroyed Jerusalem, ransacked, forgotten and unkept. So, it's time to serve God and live out God's hope. Get back to living a Godly life. But that didn't happen.

Returning to this “broken” society, there were many issues:

- economic predation by the elites against the poor
- xenophobia, an extreme distrust of anyone foreign
- oppression, hunger and poverty continued and worsened

Amongst these Judeans were a “group described as self-righteous and meticulous in [their] religious observances. [They] engaged in theological study, [sought] out divine oracles, [engaged] in cultic rites and [fasted]” (Hanson 1995) pg. 204-5. In light of the warring, the exile and the return home, many of these pious people chose to focus on ethnocentrism; a purity of ethnicity and language – Jerusalem and Judeans first! Well, not all of them, only those “who can stand on their own two feet and who will not become a public charge” [quote by Ken Cuccinelli, acting director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services] (Levin 2019).

Instead of the post-exilic Jerusalem living into the HOPE prophesied by Israel, these issues, these attitudes and these actions led Jerusalem to become a corrupt, hierarchical order which, like a YOKE, weighed heavily upon many of the people, creating a burden upon them, stopping them from being a strong, whole and healthy community. The hope is being threatened yet again, by the hard-hearted and forgetful.

This is the context in which the prophet Isaiah has written, and it is very similar to our current political climate.

Chapter 58 is very specific and focused. The prophet is instructed by God to “shout out” to the people about their hypocrisy. With all of the issues that are happening, this chapter hones in on the religious practices of fasting and observing the sabbath. Ways that honoring God.

In the eight verses preceding today’s reading, the prophet points out how corrupt Judeans have completely misunderstood and manipulated the religious practice of fasting. This is similar to Jesus and Paul in the new testament confronting the Pharisees and others on proper and accurate ways to eat, live and worship. The “fasters” cry out that they have starved their bodies, according to proper religious practices, but God does not notice. Through God, the prophet condemns them saying, “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” (v 3b-4). God knows that they’re praying and fasting simply for divine intervention in their selfish squabbles with others.

“They are HYPER correct in their religious observances and [delight] to exhibit their piety, but in their very exercise of religion they miss the essential point, God’s order of compassionate justice” (Hanson 1995).

God reminds them in verses 6 and 7:

“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 homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families” (The Message).

“The Judeans observe [the ritual of fasting], but they do only for their own benefit, not out of true devotion. Real humility toward God would engender a desire for justice toward the weak, compassion toward the downtrodden, and charity toward the poor. Then fasting would involve a willingness to give up one’s own things [like food] rather than the hope to acquire salvation” (The Jewish Study Bible 2004).

It’s at this point that the prophet offers an “if/then” instruction manual. IF you do this, THEN this will happen. What more could they ask for? They are focused on proper practice - so here, yet again, is another step-by-step instruction on what the blessings of a true worshipper look like.

- Remove the yoke (common ancient Near Eastern symbol for economic and political burdens imposed by overlords). DON’T OPPRESS OTHERS! (...AND HELP THE OPPRESSED)
- Remove the pointing of the finger. DON’T BLAME OTHERS!
- Remove speaking evil. DON’T GOSSIP!
- Feed the hungry
- Care for the afflicted.
 - Sound familiar? Jesus said the same thing in his teachings.

If you do these things, THEN

- Your light shall increase.
- Your darkness will turn to light.
- God will be there continually to guide you ... beyond empty, hollow religious rituals
- And God will make you strong with sincere hearts and compassionate actions.

If you can’t or won’t demonstrate compassion and mercy, then your ritualistic fastings and other pious religiosity are worthless.

Verse 12 says, “your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many.” If you are compassionate, merciful and fight for justice and equality of all, the new Jerusalem will appear out of the war-torn, destroyed temple before you. The homeland of peace, abundance and tranquility that both you and I want, will emerge for this generation and all yet to come.

In the last two verses of today's reading, the Prophet turns to the sabbath, pointing out again how, like fasting, they are misunderstanding and manipulating what sabbath is and how it should be honored.

What is a sabbath? <day of rest>

In Genesis, after creating everything, what did God do? <rested>

Sabbath is rest.

On the sabbath, we are not to do anything. We are to rest. God understood the importance of resting so much so, that God did it! God rested. And God says that 1) you are equally important to me that I'm telling you to rest, just like I did...and 2) when you rest you honor me. When we sabbath, we're not only resting our bodies and spirits, but we are honoring God. How great is that? When you intentionally sabbath, "DO NOTHING," you honor God. I think we can get on board with that, right?

So, what does the prophet say?

- You are trampling sabbath
- You are pursuing YOUR affairs on MY holy day
- You are going your own ways by serving your own interests

So IF you rest, IF you honor the day as holy, and IF you stop serving YOUR OWN interests,

- God will exalt you, feed you and you will delight in the blessings of God

When it comes to observing the sabbath, remember that **every day** is a day in which we, as Christians, honor God. It's not just one day a week. Look to Hebrews 4:9-11, which says, "...a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from hers. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that [same] rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs." Shockingly as it may seem, it tells that us that we aren't required to observe a "Sabbath Day," because Jesus fulfills the purpose and the plan of the Sabbath for us and in us.

Sabbath, like fasting, is not to be an empty ritual lacking meaning and consideration. God knows that after all of our work, we need to rest AND if anything, that we need to serve interests other than our own. That's sabbath.

Fasting and the sabbath "are expressions of not doing things. In fasting, you don't eat. In Sabbath keeping, you don't work. An important aspect to this chapter is showing us that what we don't do isn't enough to make us right before God. Our walk with God shouldn't only be defined by what we don't do" (Guzik 2018).

Besides fasting and keeping the sabbath, there are many ways that we practice our religion and faith.

- Sunday worship
- Prayer
 - Reciting the Lord's Prayer
- Communion
- Baptism
- Reading and/or studying scripture
 - Confirmation
 - Following daily devotionals
- Meditation
- < _____ >
 - Food and beverage choices
 - People with whom we engage and associate
 - Topics that we will/won't discuss

Religious practices and rituals, public or personal, are good. But, the prophet reminds us that they are acceptable and beneficial when they are intentional, meaningful and honor God and humanity. If they are rote, hollow and manipulative then it's not religious at all. All religious life should seek to honor God and others through love, compassion and justice.

For us, what we DON'T need to hear is judgement or chastisement for NOT attending church regularly or on a specific day, or NOT joining a ministry and working X number of volunteer hours, or NOT donating a required amount of money to the church, or NOT _____.

In Colossians 2:16-17 Paul says, "Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."

Paul was re-iterating what Jesus taught - honoring God and following Christ's teachings wasn't about being an anally-retentive rule follower. God and Jesus showed us that our faith is greater than that. Just like the post-exilic Judeans, we are living in challenging times. Let's face it, there will always be challenging times on some level. There is oppression, hunger and poverty all around us. So, what are we doing? Are we focused on our religious practices like fasting, praying, getting to church – all to make sure others see that we're "being religious?" Or are we doing these things SO THAT we end oppression, SO THAT we end hunger, SO THAT we end xenophobia....SO THAT we honor God.

Amen.

