

## A Life-Giving Lent

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:19-21

Nan Adams preached this sermon February 17, 2010, Ash Wednesday, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Pensacola, FL.

The intense emotion with which our text from Isaiah begins tonight is a little unnerving for the beginning of Lent. I've always pictured Lent as being a quiet, somber, reflective time – a time to look inward at our sinful actions of the past (or at least since the last Ash Wednesday), an occasion to think about *doing without* something we enjoy or something we take for granted. Why, then, didn't the lectionary creators put something like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in the selections for Ash Wednesday? Something to help us be a little more reflective – to calm or soothe our hurried lives so that we can get at this business of soulful thought and prayer? Instead, the texts chosen for this day in the lectionary for all three years – A, B, and C – never vary: the prophets Joel and Isaiah, Paul writing his second letter for the church in Corinth, and Matthew are our constant companions, year in and year out.

And it's Walter Brueggemann, my luminary, Old Testament professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, who pointed out that all these texts "refuse and resist" the conventional Lenten emphasis on personal piety or self-denial. He writes that not one of these texts stays preoccupied with failure or inadequacy – all of them, instead, push us forward toward "a new life that God will accomplish through a *daring obedience*. This daring obedience of the 'new fast' in Isaiah 58, for instance, is the *recovery of neighborliness alongside the oppressed, the hungry, the naked, and the homeless poor.*"<sup>1</sup>

What? Whoa! Where did that come from? Weren't we on the way to a nice, contemplative 40 days of self-mindfulness, and here we've jumped right from the frying pan into the fire. But – we can't help it. If we really take seriously the Scripture chosen for the day, then this new path, this "new fast" is unavoidable.

Isaiah 58 begins with God pleading with Isaiah to lambast the people of God about their wrong-headed religiosity: "Don't hold back on them, now Isaiah, let 'em have it! Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, *as if* they were a nation that practiced righteousness!"

The people of Israel think they're doing a good job of humbling themselves – they think they've been zealous and pious and scrupulous as to the law of God, so much so that they're puzzled as to why God hasn't noticed.

And what does God reply? "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day – and *you oppress all your workers.*"

There it is – there's the pivotal point. God says, "Look, Israel, you may well be doing all the ritual, all the sacrifice perfectly, but you've missed the whole point. It doesn't impress me in the least if some of you do the rituals perfectly, while all around you, others are suffering! If you haven't learned that I'm a God who loves the community, who cares deeply about the needs of *everyone* in the community, then you're just using your religious piety to avoid me – to avoid the reality of my presence and call to obedience in your lives."

But wait! Now comes God's positive counterargument. God does indeed choose a fast, a fast of daring obedience: "Is this not the fast I choose," says God, "to loose the bonds of injustice...to let the oppressed go free?... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?" "Then," says the Lord God, "*your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.*"

Do you see the implications here? Isaiah understands that it's not the healing of the poor and oppressed that's at issue here, it's *our* healing. The best way to get *your* life together is to help somebody else with theirs.

And do you see how conventional wisdom says the opposite? We say, "I hear you, Lord, and I really do want to serve others in need, but first, shouldn't I concentrate on me, on getting my life together?" Isaiah says that's a trap – you'll get stuck every time. Because, who here tonight can tell me they've *ever* gotten their own life together, let alone known anybody else who has? Isaiah says that the best way to get our own lives together is to do something for somebody else. Right there in verse 10, he says it: "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 will be like the noon day. The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places."

Parched places – I think that means spiritual emptiness. I think that means feeling abandoned by God, or isolated from those you love, or anger that eats away your insides, or grief that gnaws at your heart. Anybody here have any parched places? Well, then this is for you. Isaiah says, "You'll be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, you'll raise up the foundations of many generations. You will be called the repairer of the breach and the restorer of streets to live in."

Do you even suspect that this healing for our own lives comes from service to others in need?

I can tell you from personal experience that it's true. And *you've* seen it – you've seen it when the tutors for Century would go back every week, year after year, and then return home to say, "Well, I always get so much more out of it than I think I ever give to those children."

You've seen it when the Mexico Mission trip group comes back from yet another unbearably hot, humid week of back-breaking physical labor building homes side-by-side with the future occupants and sleeping without air conditioning, only to stand in the church parking lot and yell, "We can't wait to go back! O, we get so much more out of going than we ever give!"

How can this be? How can the effort of reaching out end up feeding so much more of our needs than tending only to self?

Joan Chittister writes, "Life is not an exercise to be endured. It's a mystery to be unfolded."<sup>2</sup>

How long will it take us to embrace the mystery of God's way's – the mystery that lies in engagement of God's chosen fast – that of caring for others? How long will we go thirsting and parched before we realize that the ones who truly benefit are the ones who initiate, who bring about, who participate in the healing of the ones in need? The healing, my friends, is a by-product of a life lived for the sake of others.

May this indeed be a life-giving, a life-healing Lent. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

#### NOTES

1. Walter Brueggemann, "An Answering God", *Sojourners Magazine*, February 2010 (Vol.39. No.2), p. 48
2. Joan Chittister, "Contemplation in the Midst of Chaos", *30 Good Minutes*, Program #4513, First air date: January 20, 2002.