

Isaiah 58:9b-14  
Psalm 103:1-8  
Hebrews 12:18-29  
Luke 13:10-17

In our passage from the prophet Isaiah, God calls the community of Israel back to the ways of its faith. They have been in exile, living as foreigners kept in a strange land. They have not known how to worship God in that circumstance. They have wondered how to live faithfully without the temple. This song from Isaiah comes amid promises of restoration. God will return to them to their land. It is a promise of life again! But they will need guidance for how to live after that.

I'm going to read a different translation of our passage, from *The Message*, which tries to use words that work better for today. I'll start a few verses before where our reading did today, and then read the first few from our passage. Taken together, the prophet holds out a vision of what it means to live as worshipers of the God of Israel – what it means to be people of faith.

“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. Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at once. Your righteousness will pave your way. The God of glory will secure your passage. Then when you pray, God will answer. You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I am.' If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people's sins, If you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out, Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.” (Peterson, *The Message*, Isaiah 58:6-10)

Faithfulness is a life that seeks justice, shares mercy generously, and is faithful to relationships and what is right.

Like many communities of faith, Israel probably said “Yeah, yeah, we know that.” Just like we do. We may not be sure how to do them more or better, but we’ve heard God’s suggestions over and over. In the first verse of our reading today, the prophet names some of the things that stand in our way. The Message version says, “If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people’s sins, If you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out...” (Peterson, Isaiah 58:9-10) It’s like a to-do list of faithfulness. Gossip and blaming are temptations for most of us. We often speak words about others, and to others, which do not reflect justice or mercy.

Yet the prophet does not speak strongly – it doesn’t seem that he’s trying to make us feel horrid. Instead, Isaiah simply names these behaviors that hold us back. At the end there isn’t a description of reward or punishment at the end of this big “if”. The sentence doesn’t end with, “then God will do this or that”. The prophet describes more of a natural consequence of the actions that promote justice, kindness, and mercy. “Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.” (Peterson, *The Message*, Isaiah 58:10) The image of light brings to mind a picture of joy and beauty, justice and peace.



The passage from Isaiah speaks words of promise to exiles. Even if we feel like we’re in a new place now, we’re not really exiled from God. We have not been cut off, by circumstances or choice, from being fed and nurtured by God. However, there are many exiles around us. There are people who are exiled in all sorts of ways. Refugees have resettled to our area, just like the people whom some members

see in Troy Hill. There are many people here in Bellevue who have been exiled from the church, or perhaps from God. We have neighbors who do not know the good news of our scripture – that God cares so deeply about justice and love in our world. Some of our neighbors do not the ways that God can bless humanity through relationships in Christian community.

Similar to Israel, it is not enough for our congregation to simply exist. Through our baptisms into Christ, God calls us to live the freeing, forgiving, generous, joy of God. That call transforms how we treat one another, in our families and in this congregation. That call also transforms how we think about the world around us. Those words – freeing, forgiving, generous – are all oriented toward someone else. We are called to bless the world in the ways like Jesus did – to release people from the bondage, marginalization, and pain of isolation; to heal people from the sicknesses of heart and soul; to invite people to worship the God who brings life.

We, the people of Emanuel's, have our weaknesses. Like most groups of people, we struggle with temptations to gossip and to point fingers unjustly. At different times, it is hard for us all to be gracious and merciful with our sisters and brothers in Christ. At our best, this congregation is a welcoming community, where healing can take place and new wings of freedom can be grown. We are people who mourn our losses together, as we will do this week with the Downie family. In spiritual friendships, we shoulder the burdens of life together. We pray and worship God. We teach and learn. We serve and give. Together we seek the “full life” that God promises, amidst “the emptiest of places” in our world. (Peterson, *The Message*, Isaiah 58:11)

It's time for Emanuel's to invite others into our pilgrimage with us – calling out to those who seek to find life in desolate places, who long to grow in

God's presence, and who want understanding of our life together. Our support and learning group for caregivers of older adults invites people into such life. Our Sunday morning adult Bible study of Ephesians will also be offered on Monday mornings – and we hope that will invite more people to study God's word. Months ago, we were asking questions about having another worship service. One won't start until October, but I hope that our addition will be a very different style of worship service, which will reach out to neighbors in the north boroughs. This is just the beginning! Join our congregation's imagining together. Let me know if you have ideas about how we can invite others – the lonely, the broken, the lost, everyone – to seek God's precious and abundant life.



The most beautiful thing is that this is not a church growth program. It's not what the synod suggests to ease our financial problems. This is the way to life and wholeness God imagines for us. When we reach out to others, Christ's Spirit will heal us, and our congregation, of the many ways that we are broken. As we return to the center of the gospel news, the Holy Spirit will release us from the sin that bends and binds us. As we follow God's call, "[o]ur lives will begin to glow in the darkness, [o]ur shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight." (Peterson, *The Message*, Isaiah 58:10) Thanks be to God.