

Sermon, Lent 2 (VAPC) March 8/20 - Rod Ferguson

DISPELLING GLOOM

Isaiah 58: 10

Lectionary preachers are usually good at ambiguity. We know how to preach, "On the one hand...on the other hand..." What throws some of us is a clear-cut text without any haziness like Isaiah 58.

With gusto and rhetorical skill, the poet Isaiah delivers a divine indictment against the people of Judah and instructs them on the nature of true fasting. The main character in the poem is God, who speaks through the prophet. Here the prophet anticipates the judgement on the nations found in Matthew 25. You remember words like these from Matthew.

*"You are accursed, depart from me....for I was hungry,
and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me
clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."*

It also draws on a long and rich tradition of prophetic proclamations against false worship, affirming that worship without justice has no value in the eyes of God. Let me repeat that because it holds today. **Worship without justice has no value in the eyes of God.**

The people to whom this proclamation is addressed are outwardly religious despite their transgressions, namely, their lack of righteousness and their disregard for Torah, the law of God. A gap exists between their seeking God and God's ways, and their actual way of life, which reveals the people's hypocrisy.

This people seek God relentlessly, they like to know God's ways, ask for righteous judgements from God, and enjoy drawing near to God. They fast; they humble themselves; yet God does not take notice. While they are engaging in pious rituals, they are oppressing their own workers and becoming embroiled in quarrels and fights.

This dichotomous situation is the root cause for the absence of a divine response to their "self-sacrifices." Furthermore, the people's fasting includes other pious yet empty acts, such as bowing down their heads and wearing sackcloth and ashes.

The theological point is clear: acts of religious piety as private acts of devotion are meaningless when they are divorced from acts of justice and righteousness.

Every Sunday morning in North America many go to worship services and say prayers. In some churches those prayers are in written form. In some, they are not even thought about. We all sing. In some churches it is three or four hymns and in others it is a dozen choruses. In some people genuflect. In others, they dance. In yet other churches, worshippers hardly move. Some Churches try to make everything seem very today. Others make everything seem 50 years ago.

No minister needs to be told that many mainline North American churches are in crisis. We ministers hear enough about it in church journals, from our seminaries, and in conversations with colleagues and friends. Budgets, membership, and attendance are all down across the board. There is a surprising consensus that the mainline church has to change or die.

But change how? nThere are “post liberal,” “postmodern,” “post-Enlightenment,” or “post-Constantinian” Christians; “new monastic,” or “new Reformation” Christians” - anything to distinguish themselves from what came before.

Often this change is most concentrated in the worship life of the church. Churches are experimenting with “contemporary,” “emergent,” “charismatic,” “praise,” or even “post-liturgical” styles. In identifying the mistakes of the past and avoiding those mistakes in the present, the hope is that the people of God can secure a new future.

Isaiah’s people too are looking back to figure out what went wrong that led to their demise, their Exile in Babylon

They too have to rethink what it means to worship the God of Israel in a “post” world: “post-temple,” “post-exile,” “post-Davidic monarchy.” Worship for them has become a proxy for all of the change that must occur if a covenant community is going to avoid the mistakes of the past and secure a new future.

Worship style and practice, however, are not what pleases or offends God, according to Isaiah, and the same is true for today. God could care less about our worship style and practice. They are not to blame for the post-exilic decline of Israel.” They are not the measuring sticks by which the people of God will be judged. They will not restore or preserve a relationship with God in and of themselves. This is a curious thing to say to Israel, a community reconstituting itself following a return from exile.

It is a frustrating thing to say to a church today that trying to reinvent itself... beginning with the practice of worship. In some ways worship is the most important thing we do together. It is the place that forms us into the people of God. It is the

place where we inhale God's love and grace, so that we can be sent forth to **exhale** God's love and grace in a broken world in need of redemption.

The critique that God offers through the mouth of Isaiah is that the more Israel has become self-conscious about its improved worship life, the less it has remained open to God's vision for the community. Worship practice and style comes to be-the-end-all, Praise, prayer, and fasting are cherished not as gifts that nurture the covenant or relationship with God, but as techniques for drawing attention to its human participants. That is why the people spend so much time in worship, according to Isaiah. They fast so that God will see them. They humble themselves so that God will notice. They fast to make their voices heard by God.

Isaiah is concerned, and the contemporary church should be concerned, that obsession with right worship distracts the people from what really determines the future of the community - its effort to fulfill the ethical obligations of justice demanded by God

In Isaiah's imagination, the rejection of the practice of justice was the cause of Exile, It is the reason for God not seeming near. The future of the community will be determined by its willingness to embrace justice and a new sense of community - the very ethic that forms the content of people's worship. Isaiah's call to this new fasting becomes the cornerstone that joins worship and Christian discipleship. Let us remind ourselves again, of what God says is right fasting, right worship, at verse 6:

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of Injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yolk,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

Then, we read, then,

Then *your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindication shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then, (and let me add, **only then**)
you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

Not much ambiguity here, is there? What concerns God is not our reordering of worship, but how worship reorders us. The people addressed by Isaiah complain that they have worshipped correctly, they have observed the fasts, But God has not answered their prayers.

Isaiah points out that the wealthy are fasting on the holy days, but their employees still have to work on those days. God requires both worship and merciful attention to others. Those who attend worship services usually do not appreciate having their insincerity pointed out, but Isaiah tells them that religious people can be the most quarrelsome, (vs.4).

The prophet sounds sarcastic (v.5) when he calls them to the kind of worship that does **more** than anesthetize the conscience. While the people believed fasting made them look good, God's wanted worshippers to fast as a means of sharing with others (vv.6-7). Those listening to Isaiah must have been relieved when he began to list the benefits of genuine worship- light, healing, and protection (v.8). God will respond when the barrier of insincere worship has been removed. Evil can be set aside and kindness practiced, and God's people will share their food with the poor, understanding that not only do the hungry need our food, but also God's people need the hungry. It is in giving that our "gloom will be like the noonday" (v.10).

You see the conditionality to the promises of God. If fingers are not pointed, (that is nasty, blaming behaviour not practiced), and food is offered to the hungry and the afflicted are ministered unto (in other words pastoral care offered to those who need it)...**then**...then the promise follows: You, the righteous, shall shine like a beacon in the darkness, "and your gloom shall be like the noonday, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail."

There are many polemics in the Old Testament against manipulative and insincere worship contemporary to Isaiah. Two examples: Amos, an Israelite contemporary of Isaiah of Jerusalem, voices the Lord's rejection of cult and in diametrical opposition cries "*Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*" (5:24).

And another contemporary of Isaiah is the prophet Micah, who juxtaposes prophetic torah (law) with hollow worship, and I will conclude with his words in Chapter 6 at verse 8

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"