

Scripture: Isaiah 58 (adapted) ¹ Thus says the Lord: Shout out; do not hold back! Announce to my people their rebellion and sin. ² Day after day they seek me to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake my covenant; they ask of me righteous judgments; they want God on their side, crying ³ “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and exploit your workers. ⁴ You fast only to quarrel and to fight. Such fasting will not make your voice heard on high. ⁵ Is this what you think I’m after – a day to put on a long face and parade around solemnly? No! ⁶ This is the fast that I choose: to actually break the chains of injustice, to rid the workplace of exploitation, to let the oppressed go free, and to unburden people! ⁷ I want you to share your bread with the hungry and invite the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not avoid your own family. ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and healing and wholeness will follow. ⁹ Then you shall call on me, and I will answer. ¹⁰ If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then you’ll find light in the darkness. ¹¹ 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 that never runs dry. ¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, with a solid foundation for the future; and you’ll be known as repairers of the breach and restorers of community. ¹³ If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath and pursuing your own interests on my holy day; ¹⁴ then you’ll be free to enjoy my presence. You’ll soar to new heights and feast on the heritage of Jacob. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Isaiah 58

03/05/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

Ash Wednesday Sermon

Rev. Amy Terhune

In her reflection in this morning’s newsletter, Diana Butler Bass opened with these words:

On this Ash Wednesday, my heart is broken and every shred of hope I once had is gone.

I’m *not* well. My soul is sick. I see nothing but greed, destruction, lying, inhumanity, and evil all around.

If anyone tells me that I came from ash and will return to it, I may well laugh in their face. Or cry and never stop. I just hope I don’t hit the priest. Because — *read the room, people* — we’re standing in ash up to our knees. [from <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/ash-wednesdays-bad-piety>].

But she goes on to point out that all her sobbing, wailing, protesting, anger, and spiritual self-flagellation may not be nearly so effective as paying attention to Isaiah’s words from chapter 58, which calls us to a different kind of fast.

A little background. The Israelites have been in exile for 70 years. The cream of the crop, the leaders, the intelligencia, the gifted – these are the people that Babylon carted off 70 years ago, plundering their land and exploiting their talents and gifts for 3 generations. But when Persia defeats Babylon, the Jews have a choice. They can remain in the new places where they’ve settled, and many did. Or they can return to Israel. And many did that, too. But as Tony Everett points out that, “They were wealthy nobles and landowners in Judah before the exile. Since they were forbidden to own property in Babylon, many became bankers, and business people in one of the world’s most powerful empires.

It was this group of "haves" who expected to be welcomed home by a rejoicing city of "have nots" as they marched triumphantly through the streets of Jerusalem. [from "What Did The Turkey Say? (Or Contentious Communities)" by Tony Everett, www.Sermons.com]. Instead, they return to find the city still in ruins, other peoples have taken over their farms and vineyards – people who don't share their culture or faith history. The Jews who were left in the region have largely assimilated into the surrounding culture, and no amount of guilt or enticement seems to evoke change. To which Isaiah responds. You pour your grief out to God. You fast and pray, all while treating those here as 'other'. You have no compassion, no respect, no regard for who is already here. You have one interest: your own. If you want things to be better, you can't fast for fasting's sake. It has to touch your heart and change how you live. You who were exploited and used by Babylon, have turned around to do the same thing – exploiting desperate people, ignoring the suffering, forgetting who you are as God's people. "You fast, only to quarrel and fight and strike with a mean fist. That kind of fasting won't get your prayers off the ground!" Isaiah saw that kind of fasting for what it was: Hypocrisy. Outward show, inward emptiness. In short, sin.

Which is not a topic we enjoy dwelling upon. Yet God takes it seriously, not because God is mean and judgmental, but because God know that sin inhibits living life to the fullest measure. As we begin the season of Lent, a 40-day season of self-reflection, repentance, and recommitment, we remember our mortality, our finite lives. Time's a-ticking—are we using the time we're given to grow in faith and make a difference in the world, or are we just passing time? Let me be clear: today is not about groveling or despair. Today is about growing in devotion. We're not awful, no matter what the world or even we ourselves may tell ourselves. No. We are created in the Divine image and likeness, and we are good. We loved. We are precious. But we are sinful. Separated. Broken. We cannot talk about Ash Wednesday and not talk about sin. But neither can we talk about Ash Wednesday without talking about hope, about love, about God abundant unmerited grace. The response to God's gifts, to God's love, is to want to love God back as best we can.

Traditionally, this is a time of sacrifice. Thus, many involve themselves in some form of fasting, either by giving up sweets or meat or one of their meals each week. Others among us may give up time normally spent on ourselves in order to spend it in prayer, meditation, or service. Still others mark this time with financial sacrifice for the sake of mission in our community and our world. In our consumer culture where we really do have too much of just about *everything*, fasting in some fashion is a worthwhile endeavor. It is good for us to go without. Meaningful sacrifice changes us, deepens our trust, grows our character.

When I was down at Cass UMC a few months ago, I spent some time talking with Rev. Sue Pethoud, who is the Deacon that oversees ministry down there. And she told me something interesting. She said one of the biggest expenses they had to cover was trash removal. You see, when people donate stuff to Cass, most of the time, they're thinking about getting rid of stuff they don't want or need. For too many, charitable outfits are cheap trash disposal. They donate a chair and a toaster and 20 bags of clothes, half of which, are stained, torn, stretched out of shape, or otherwise unwearable. If I wouldn't want to wear it, why should I think someone else would? We don't ask ourselves what they need to have. We ask ourselves what we need to get rid of. Businesses do the same, which is why our group carried boxes of donated cosmetics to the dumpster. Some business had extra, and donated it – foundation and lip glosses mostly for white skin tones. After they sit there unneeded for a couple of months – they wind up in the trash. The really sad thing is that they do need makeup to help ladies get ready for job interviews – makeup for black skin tones. But nobody asks who their clientele are.

Isaiah's frustration was not with the fasting, but with the fact that they used it for selfish purposes. He was vexed, not by the practice of spiritual discipline, but by the fact that it didn't change their hearts.

But Christ does. Change hearts, that is. If we let him. The journey we begin today is one that we walk with Jesus, not apart from him. It is a time to relinquish power over our lives and be empowered by the grace of God. According to Isaiah, we fast from selfishness, from a need to control and dominate, from business as usual, and instead, open ourselves to God's life-giving grace. Today, then, is about tapping into a wellspring of love and grace. It's about changed hearts. It's about repentance. We may understand that in two ways. First, to repent is to uncover, expose, acknowledge.

You may have heard about the schoolteacher who injured his back and had to wear a plaster cast around the upper part of his body. It fit under his shirt and was not noticeable at all. On the first day of the term, still with the cast under his shirt, he found himself assigned to the toughest students in school. Walking confidently into the rowdy classroom, he opened the window as wide as possible and then busied himself with desk work. When a strong breeze made his tie flap, he took the desk stapler and stapled the tie to his chest. He had no trouble with discipline that term. [from "pretenders" by King Duncan, www.esermons.com.] None of us are really that tough. None of us are really that in control. None of us really have it all together. But admitting that is not easy.

The second meaning of repentance is to strike out in a new direction—one leading deeper within our souls in order to reach out in compassion. That's what Isaiah was trying to get at when he explains to his people that closeness with God is not achieved by jumping through hoops, but by an inward longing fed by strength of character and depth of commitment. Repentance calls us to examine not only our actions and choices, but the reasons behind them. Repentance calls us not merely to remorse but to transformation and discovery. Then, says Isaiah, "the Lord will satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that never runs dry." What a powerful image that is! Repentance is life-giving! And it is so because in turning our hearts back to God, it offers a fresh start, a new road, a better self. Moreover, in repentance, we not only open ourselves to God's grace, we open the world to God's grace flowing through us. A spring that never runs dry.

So this Lent, don't give up. We may be up to our knees in ash, but God is still God, and God invites us to hope, to renewal and life and justice. Let us do more than confess our sins. Let us open ourselves to God's cleansing and ask him to replace the selfish desires, the ulterior motives, the nursed grudges, and the idols we've constructed with the power of his love and grace. Let us stop asking what's in it for me, for us, and instead, look to the cross of Jesus Christ, remembering that he did not give himself because of what was in it for him, but because of what it would do for us. Let us admit aloud that we're tired of pretending. Let us respond, repent, renew our faith, embrace our authentic selves and allow others to do the same. This Lent, don't give up. Instead, Let's give our hearts up to God, that God may heal what's hurt, purge what's sinful, and empower what is good, so that our lives will reflect light in the darkness; so that we will know a full life in parched places; so that we can share with an ash-choked world the spring that never runs dry. Amen.