

Letting Go for Lent
2019

Isaiah 58: 1-12

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Tandy Gilliland

Taylor

Years ago, when my children were both in high school, we had an interesting family conversation around the dinner table on Ash Wednesday. Our daughter Emily said she was trying to think of what to “give up” for Lent. We are Presbyterian, so we don’t have a lot of practice with giving things up for Lent, so this was relatively new territory for us. Our son Sam, who was then a senior, responded by saying, “I know what I’m going to give up.” We all looked at him, astonished that this had even crossed his mind. We all said, “What?” And with a straight face, he said, “Homework.” And I do believe that rascal really did give up homework for the rest of that entire school year!

Last week, Ash Wednesday was the first day of the season of Lent, the 40 days of self-examination and prayer leading up to Easter. Lots of people “give up” something for Lent, as a symbolic “fast”. Fasting has a long and powerful history: choosing to go without food for a day in Bible times was an act of humility and repentance that was virtually always combined with prayer. Fasting has continued throughout the centuries as a meaningful spiritual practice, notably for John Wesley, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton.

Our text this morning is about fasting; it’s Isaiah 58: 1-9. These are the words of God spoken to the prophet Isaiah:

*Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they
were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the
ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to
draw near to God.*

*(The people ask:) “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble
ourselves, but you do not notice?”*

*(God replies to the people:) Look, 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. Such fasting as you do today will not*

make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, 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 your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

The people of Isaiah's day wanted to be close to God. Early in the text, God is quoted as saying, "They seek me, and delight to know my ways; they delight to draw near to God." They pray and fast, hoping to please God. But God roars in response, that they just don't get it: if they truly want to please God, they will live lives of justice and compassion toward all God's children.

Paul Hanson, a professor at Harvard Divinity School, writes this about this text: "the one who would be true to God is placed on the side of those whom God reaches out to help and empower: those suffering injustice at the hands of authorities, those imprisoned for acts of conscience, those denied their fair share of the land's produce, those denied housing and proper clothing, those turned away even by their own relatives."

This text points the way for us on our spiritual journey of Lent. This text makes it clear that our personal, "spiritual" practices cannot be separated from living /actively pursuing/ lives of justice and compassion. This text calls us to open our eyes to really see the people who are often invisible to society, and to treat all God's children with fairness, respect, dignity, and kindness. God is basically saying here, "The way you show me how much you love me is to love other people." As Presbyterian leader Thomas

Currie writes, “this text is where the journey of Lent takes us: the place where God’s fast pours itself out for the sake of the whole world.”

Sergeant Isaac Woodard, 26 years old, was a decorated African-American veteran who had served 3 years in the Pacific in World War II. After the war was over, he headed home to Winnsboro, SC. The last leg of his journey was on a Greyhound bus from Augusta, Georgia, in February of 1946. A brief heated exchange with the bus driver led to Woodard being forcibly removed from the bus in Batesburg. He was arrested on phony charges, and then, during the night in jail, Police Chief Lynwood Shull beat him with his nightstick, blinding him permanently.

President Harry Truman heard of the incident; he was outraged by this mistreatment of a uniformed American soldier. Within days, criminal civil rights charges were filed against Police Chief Shull. Truman also formed the first presidential committee on civil rights, which led to end of segregation in the military as well as the beginning of the end of the Jim Crow laws.

Police Chief Shull was acquitted by an all-white jury. But the judge in the case, Judge Waties Waring, whose father was a Confederate veteran, was horrified by this miscarriage of justice. Judge Waring soon began issuing landmark civil rights decisions that rocked South Carolina’s status quo. In a 1951 case, he wrote the dissenting opinion declaring school segregation unconstitutional; that articulation became the model for the Supreme Court’s unanimous decision 3 years later in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Just last month, the town of Batesburg expunged Woodard’s conviction and erected a historic marker telling this story. And there’s a brand new book out about the many layers of this story, entitled [Unexampled Courage: The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard and the Awakening of President Harry S. Truman and Judge J. Waties Waring.](#) The author is a judge himself, Richard Gergel, who presided over the case of the church shootings at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston.

Opening our eyes to see the history of injustice in our state and in our nation is a first step toward acting on behalf of justice. Opening our eyes

to see the suffering of our brother and sister right in front of us is the beginning of this Lenten journey. Opening our hearts to each other, to be tender with one another's pain and suffering and vulnerability, is part of our journey with God. Prioritizing what is good for the whole community, rather than focusing on what is good for me and mine, is a step along the way. The fast that God chooses describes a vision for humanity that can only be a life with and for each other. The fast that God chooses results in healing, the healing that God mentions in the final verses of our text: "your healing shall spring up quickly", that healing of individuals that cannot be separated from the healing of the whole community.

On this First Sunday of Lent, we begin this Lenten fast.