

Homily on Isaiah 58:1–9a, (9b–12)
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
February 5, 2017
The Rev. Michelle P. Mooney
St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Today we have a conversation between the Prophet Isaiah and the people of Judea. The prophet is not calling them to task for worshiping of false Gods as he has done in the past. Rather he is denouncing the way they practice proper religious practices hypocritically. The Judeans responses are as we might expect, “But we did the fasts, we wore the sack cloth and ashes, what more do you want?”

Isaiah responds with a biting criticism of how they are performing their religious practices mainly to insure their own well-being, not out of true dedication to their God and with humility. He goes on to say that real humility towards God would engender a desire for justice toward the weak, compassion toward the downtrodden, and charity for the poor. Fasting would involve a willingness to give things up of their own, rather than hoping to acquire salvation.

Isaiah tells the Judeans, that his fast would involve, “to loose the bonds of justice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yolk...Share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house...When you see the naked, to cover them and not hide yourself from your own kin.” This is a pretty high standard he is setting.

Now it is easy to dismiss Isaiah by saying, “I don't see naked people in the street, I don't see people suffering under the yolk, that is people who are enslaved. And how in the world could I even consider inviting the homeless person I encounter on the street into my home or offer them MY food? Why, we have shelters and feeding programs for that.’

But apparently in Isaiah's time it was possible and necessary to do these things and more. For he also challenges them to stop pointing their finger at others in judgement, rather than facing their own sins. And to speak not of evil.

This turning away from their sinful sides, their greed, their selfishness, their oppression, will however bring a better life for them. Isaiah promises, “light shall break forth like dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly. Your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of God shall be your rear guard.”

Understand that Isaiah was talking to the Judeans at a time when they were questioning why things were not going better for them after their return to Judea after years in Babylonian exile. They felt they that their sins were only part of Israel's past, and that God was going to treat the nation with grace from that time forward. Isaiah makes it clear that they must take responsibility for living as a nation that truly follows God's law. The Covenant was not a one-time sealed deal. It was to be in the forefront of the Nation of Israel forever, continually renewed by righteous living.

But let's advance to more recent times. I would like to tell you what my father often told his children over the years. He immigrated here with my mom and brother in 1937. They found a great country to work in and felt welcomed by even the insular people of Texas. After WWII, my parents decided to become American citizens. My father said that it was because America was the great hope of the world. It gave opportunities to all who came escaping the old world and old orders for a new start in a young land. Now my father, a French socialist, translate democrat in America, was not a fool. He knew, and was vocal and active, in standing up against the injustices around him in places like Texas and Oklahoma. But he always remained a stanch defender of his chosen country and what he felt were its dominant ideals. And he certainly felt a moral obligation to be the best citizen he could be.

I have thought about him a lot recently and wonder what he would make of events today. Would he feel, as I do, that we may be called to a restoration of American values, when we begin to see them threatened. How will we do this great and difficult work if it is indeed called for both individually and collectively?

I believe that we must look within ourselves to see where we can further a more just society for all people. We must do what we can to make America remain a place of promise, and hope. We must find the small and large acts that done, individually or collectively with others of a like mind, will ensure freedom and equality.

Collectively we must stand and be counted wherever we see injustice and the resulting lack of freedom and hope that follows. We must keep working to help America remain a beacon of peace and hospitality. Hospitality because Christ tells us that there are no "us and them," only *we*. All of us have a shared humanity in His sight.

I believe that this can happen.

I believe that we can remain a beacon of hope.

I believe that we can trust the "better angels of our nature" rather than fear and selfishness.

We are the Judaens of today. We can make the choices that keep America the hope and light of the world. We, individually and collectively, under God's rule and promise, can go forward, though it may at times be hard to discern and require great patience to find the way.

We are God's light in the world. Amen.