

As If.
ISAIAH 58:1-12
09 OCTOBER 2023
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

Our second text comes from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 58, verses 1-12 Listen for the word of God:

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, and 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.

“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 oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting 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,
and 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 them 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.*

Today we're talking about service. It's a goal of our life together this year and part of the sermon series during which we've explored our pillars. Any number of you, I imagine, would say that Westminster is a church that cares about service. We serve our neighbors. We serve one another. We go down to Brewery 85 and serve an ice cold Greenville IPA.

In a very real way, service is what drew me to this church. I imagine it's what has drawn so many of you to this church, even when you may have quarrels with *this* program or *that* sermon. Westminster serves.

But I've become convinced in this season after Covid that there's something more to service that we often don't discuss — something that starts right here in our pews.

Take for the example the passage I read from Isaiah.

You may not immediately realize it when reading the text, but any of you who has, at any time, been a teenage girl or had a teenage girl will recognize the tone that lies behind Isaiah 58. We only have God's response, not the imploring of the Israelites. But it's not too hard from the response to get to the bottom of their plea.

Behind Isaiah 58 are the angst-filled cries of a 15 year-old who hasn't gotten her way and has barely, begrudgingly done her chores but who, despite it all, “just. has. to. go. out. tonight, Mom, because I've done everything you asked” (have you?) “and I love you and you're the best mom and COME. ON. *I wouldn't have done it if I'd known you wouldn't let me go.*” Any parent will recognize the rhetorical device that Isaiah reports straight from the mouth of God as a response to the plea. I've chosen to re-write it in modern language:

*Day after day you ask me to set you free — you ask to go out,
as if you were a child who did not know what I expect!
Is this not the obedience that I choose? — cries the parent —
To loose the mugs in the dishwasher?
To undo the chaos of your room?
To let your laundry be folded?
Is it not to contribute to the well-being of my household,
and to be kind to your brother,
even if the odor is originating from him?
Then my house shall be clean.
Then order will be restored.
Then the neighbors will see that I have done it!
You shall call and be able to stay out till Midnight.
You shall cry for allowance, and I will provide.*

Y'all think I'm kidding but I'm drawing an analogy the best way I know how. We have in Isaiah the story of a pubescent child, Judah — the Southern Kingdom of Israel returned from exile in Babylon. Now Judah has been a good child in the past, faithful to God. Or at least the folks of Judah have looked faithful, what with all of their festivals and church services and fasting and feasting. And Judah expects a reward for her faithfulness. “Why” croon the people, “do we bring our finest sacrifices and offerings, why do we we humble ourselves if you will not notice!”

All the signifiers are there: they have cleaned the dishes, the rooms are neat-*ish*, and no one is screaming. But the thing signified, the *right* ordering of covenant life, which for Isaiah is *worship that extends into the social economy*, worship whose power transforms *not only individuals but communities* is missing. And God has noticed that.

I want to tell y'all, while we're talking about teenagers, about the best movie ever made. In the year of our Lord 1995, Paramount Pictures brought a remake of Jane Austen's *Emma* to the silver screen. Hold right there — the movie is not *Emma* — featuring G. Paltrow. No, I'm talking about *Clueless*, an incomparable coming-of-age masterpiece.

You may not know *Clueless* but if you were around for the '90s you may recall its linguistic legacy, certainly traumatic to anyone who was, at that time, the mother of a teenager girl. The protagonist, Cher Horowitz, was a “Valley Girl” who embodied upspeak and popularized in American slang the iconic, devastating retort (ubiquitous in shopping malls in the '90s) “*as if*.”

I hear Cher Horowitz every time I read this passage. I hear her voice in God's. It's right there in the text: “day they seek me and delight to know my ways, **as if** they were a nation that practiced righteousness, as if they did not forsake the ordinance of their God.”

The Israelites are looking for a reward for all of their faithful labor. Instead they get the anvil, *as if*: you may be showing up but your heart's not right. And that matters.

To be fair, the Judeans, like most 15 year old girls, had undoubtedly legitimate complaints. After all, theirs was a community in turmoil. Only recently rescued by the Persian Emperor Cyrus, the people to whom Isaiah made his pronouncement have lived in a perpetual state of threat from which they were only partially delivered. They were back in their homes but they were still under the yoke of a foreign ruler. When Cyrus returned them to Jerusalem after their shared trauma things didn't look like they expected, and they blamed God.

Why! they cry, *do we fast if you will not acknowledge us, why do we sacrifice if you will make the way easier for us, why are we here if you refuse to reward us.*

God's response bellows. "Shout out," calls God to Isaiah, "do not hold back! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins."

God's righteous anger seeps off the page with satisfying clarity, but the pronouncement that follows should set preacher folk like me, and church goers like y'all, on edge. God's target is not the unreligious, those for whom God is far-away. No, God's "as if" is for the hyper-religious, the spiritual, the seekers and the everyday pew fillers. When God cries out "as if," he is speaking to us.

"day after day they seek me" and "delight to know my ways." As with the pious religious in Matthew, God is addressing and correcting the faithful congregation, those who are showing up and doing the work. God's addressing the Elders, the volunteers, the folks who read the bulletin cover-to-cover. God has looked on their piety and their public performance of religion and found something deeply troubling.

The faithful were so busy looking at each other — admiring their Sabbath Festival best and eyeing the fine sacrifices brought by the Joneses and the impressive donation to the poor house from the estate of the Rockefellers that they failed to notice what God was doing (what God *could do*) in their own lives! They were so busy expecting rewards for their selflessness that they missed all of the places around them aflame with the spark of divine presence.

Why such a profound oversight? The problem, I think, was not a lack of good intentions, it was a failure to understand the order of operations in God's good kingdom.

In all the great joy of returning from exile they forgot that they were *still* dependent on God's mercy for all their living. Their faithfulness was not a response to God's abundant grace in their own lives. Instead it was a show of all they assumed *they* had accomplished.

The faithful trusted what they could do for the temple, synagogue, and community without first asking what they needed to do, what God would *have them* do. They may have been doing good, but they weren't seeking God.

Why does it matter that this text is addressed to the worshipping body, the covenant community of Jews, and now also to the church? God could have saved a considerable amount of hollering if he'd just gone down to United Ministries or Soteria. Certainly they are sharing their bread and loosing bonds of injustice!

But God had Isaiah bring this word to the congregation.

Why does it matter? Because what we do here, Sunday after Sunday, matters. If it's about going out and doing good then I'll be the first to admit: there are a million options better than the conflagration of saints and sinners we call the church.

But God comes first to those called to be God's body, which tells me that there's something critically important about starting here, something essential in what we hear in this place, *and then* something vital about getting out to serve the word. There's something to the divine order of operations, the math that governs it all.

Today we're talking about service.
I haven't forgotten.

But what I think I've learned in these texts is that faithful Christian service to the world starts in the pews when we who are mighty experience, confess, and proclaim our utter reliance on God, our dependence on being served by the hand of the almighty.

Service starts when your heart is made right in worship, when you allow God to serve, correct, and transform *you* according to the divine will. Without that, our service in the world is nothing more than chasing after our own desires, remaking the world according to what we think is right. Without that, we're a voluntary association come together to support Clemson or Carolina or the DNC or the RNC or this social service or that, whatever we think the world ought to be.

The service we are called to offer — the service we *must* offer — is not about what we think we ought to be doing, otherwise it is sheer ideology, indoctrination by cable news, a liturgy of preference. It's about God's will for the world, it's about a world bigger than us in our limited sight.

Look around. There are people in this sanctuary that voted differently than you. There are people here who make more than you and people here who less than you. There are people here whose lives look totally different than yours. But we're all here together. We stood up together to proclaim the goodness of God in the call to worship. Together we joined our voices to confess that we are equally sinful before God, and to hear the blessed freedom of pardon.

We are all here together despite our very real differences because what God wants is not robotic piety *or* good-looking humanism. God wants disciples, coming in and going out. God wants folks in all of their divine diversity to bend their wills not to some social paradigm but to the kingdom.

And that singular, world-transforming fact is greater than anything any one of us could do on our own.

Westminster Church is not a voluntary organization, it is the body of God *compelled* to be light to the world! We are called by something greater than the accidents of our birth. Republican, Democrat, independent, black, white, Asian, gay, straight, male, female, nonbinary, Gamecocks, Tigers — embodying our differences we nonetheless arrive at this place equal before God. We come here to be confronted and corrected, we come here to be comforted and summoned, we ask to receive grace after grace not for our own good — the child who cleans her room only for the extra privilege — but so that we can better discern God’s will and *be God’s people*.

Service does not start with what we think we can do for the world, what *we* think *they* need — we are not the saviors here, we are not swooping in to “fix” the “least of these.” *We* are the least of these, and we can’t do anything for the world until we can admit that one singular fact of our lives. But the only place we can learn that is right here, in worship, in confession, in proclamation, bare before the power of God.

Everywhere else society tells us that what we want is right, that our prejudices are justified, that we ought to pursue our highest desires, that we are the masters of our fate. Here we learn of God’s kingdom and our place. Here we learn to serve God, and in serving God, serve God’s people. Here we learn that we — all of us — are called in all our difference to till the soil of one kingdom, side by side with the world.

In the ancient priestly tradition a blessing followed the proclamation of torah at the end of each service. The blessing was not just a kind word to wrap up the day. It was performative speech understood as the true word of God. The blessing was meant to do something, to gather all the energy built up in worship and send it powerfully into the world, like a buzzing generator, ready to light the community.

There’s one caveat to that profound priestly power: the priests who wished to lift their hands in blessing had to first open their hands before God, they had to admit utter dependence on God and receive life from God. They could not simply bless the world on their own terms. They had to hear God’s intention and be made into God’s people. Then and only then could they act as conductors of divine energy.

We too are called to bless and serve the world. But first we must open ourselves to receive God’s blessed correction and hear God’s blessed will. *Service starts here when we admit that we are, at every*

moment, served by God — we are not, therefore, people of our own creation — and when we seek God's will — not our own.

God is measuring the gap between *intention expressed in worship* and *conduct outside of worship*. And the gap widens with each act of penitence in the sanctuary that does not correspond to an act of mercy, *of service* outside the sanctuary's walls. The gap widens when we fail to acknowledge our dependence, when we refuse the bond of mutuality (the community) to which we have been called.

Piety, whatever form it takes, that is not done with one foot in this place and one foot in the world is better left undone. If our fasting does not also feed the hungry, if our worship does not clothe the naked, if our confession does not affect our spending, then our earnest acts are done in vain. If we do not love our neighbors as we love our God, subjecting ourselves to their needs, then we are not people of faith, we're people who like to put on a show. We are not people who love. We are people who love to seem.

God is calling us to imagine the world as it should be, as it *can* be, *as it was created to be*. That calling is heard and sustained here, in worship, where we come to understand the counter-intuitive, maddening truth that ours is a God who sends us away from ourselves and toward the Kingdom, ours is a God out on the road.

So go out. "Go on, get." Serve. And then come back. Because we are a people who need to hear things again and again. Remember that our worship and our service does not end with the benediction but with the coming of the Kingdom. That's the movement from *As if* to *then*:

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.

From their pews God heard the Judeans and the pious well-intentioned Pharisees too. God heard them and called them to true service. And God will hear you. You've done the first thing. You got here. Be here. Be transformed. And then get out. People will come to this place because you have been out in our world, in God's place doing the work that God has required. Not the petulance of a teenager, but the satisfaction of one who has been served by God, filled by the Spirit, who understands the order of operations in the wild kingdom of God. Not *As if*, *then*.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, *Here I am*.