

Ash Wednesday Service

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 February 2024

Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[0:01] If you are new to St. John's or to Anglicism at all, welcome. This is the full immersion experience right here. We are known for being a very chipper people.

As Will said earlier, Ash Wednesday is considered the doorway to this season called Lent. Lent is a season of prayer, fasting, self-examination, and almsgiving, in other words, generosity.

And the word Lent means lengthening. It comes from the season of spring, when the days are getting longer. And the church sets aside in spring, the season of growth, 40 days, which mirrors the 40 years that Israel spent in the wilderness, and the 40 days that Jesus himself spent in the desert.

And this imagery is meant to be an image of preparation. Israel spent 40 years as preparation for the Promised Land. Jesus spent 40 days as preparation for his public ministry.

And the church spends 40 days as preparation for the celebration of the fruits of Jesus' ministry through his death and resurrection. So you get this dynamic where you have something you want to celebrate, and so you prepare for it.

[1:14] And this happens throughout the Christian year, in Christmas and in Easter and in Pentecost, where you're about to feast, and so you decide to fast as you head towards it. And this actually taps really deeply into something that's core to the Christian faith.

It's that fasting is never an end in and of itself. Fasting is always preparation for a must-greater feasting. See, the riches of God's kindness and grace are so full, they're oh, so overflowing, they're so gracious and merciful to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, that feasting will be the final word in our lives.

Feasting will be the last word on the church, and feasting will be the last word on the world, because Jesus Christ has come to redeem it. And it's this imagery of fasting and feasting that are the central themes of Isaiah chapter 58.

If you would turn there with me again in your pew Bibles, it's page 617. And the major question at the heart of this chapter is, what kind of fast really honors and pleases the Lord?

It's a very Lenten question. And Isaiah 58 revolves around this contrast between two different types of fasting, and then wraps things up with showing us how true fasting leads to deep feasting.

[2:36] So those are the two points. The contrast between two types of fasting, and then how fasting leads to feasting. So let's start with the contrast. In Isaiah 58, verse 1, God calls upon Isaiah to call out the sins of his people with uncompromising realism.

Verse 1, cry out loud, do not hold back. In other words, Isaiah, don't sugarcoat it, don't glide over it, don't dull down the sharp edge of it, don't dumb down the truth of it, don't go easy on them, let them feel the full force of their sin.

Let them feel the full weight of their lives. Cry out loud, do not hold back, lift up your voice like a trumpet so it's loud and clear. Declare to my people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sins.

And their sins are exposed through this contrast of two types of fasting. So in verses 2 through 5, we get the fast that displeases God, and then in verses 6 through 12, we get the fast that pleases God.

2 through 5, the fast that we humans choose, and 6 through 12, the fast that God himself chooses for us. In verses 2 and 3, we get this description of the people of God in worship.

[3:57] They're seeking God. They're delighting in his word. They're petitioning him for their needs. They're drawing near to him by fasting, but God is not responding to them. The word of God comes to a people who are very religious, but they find no satisfaction in their religion because God is not pleased with it.

And God's critique throughout is very simple. Do you think that I am pleased by a piety that seeks its own pleasure at the expense of others? Verse 3, the second half.

Behold, in the day of your fast, you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice heard on high. Is this the fast that I choose? Do you notice the juxtaposition between the fast that they have chosen and the fast that God chooses? And then that picks up again in verse 6. Is not this the fast that I choose? To loose the bonds of wickedness? To undo the straps of the yoke?

[5 : 09] To let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry? And to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked to cover him?

And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Isaiah 58, the people of God are confronted with the harrowing reality that personal piety without social justice is not pleasing to the Lord.

God addresses a church that has become numb to his heart for the suffering. In her book, *Suffering in the Heart of God*, Diane Laneberg, a psychologist and psychiatrist, recounts visiting Cape Coast Castle in Ghana.

A place where hundreds of thousands of Africans were forced through the doorways of dungeons and then to the point of no return as they boarded slave ships. There were five dungeons for males in particular who would be chained and shackled to one another for about three months in the dungeon as a holding place before they were shipped across the Atlantic.

And Diane in her book recounts hearing this horrific story as she herself stood in the darkness of one of those dungeons. And after hearing this story, her guide suddenly asked the question, Do you know what is above the dungeon?

[6 : 35] And they sat in silence for a while, and after a long silence, the guide said, A chapel.

Directly above 200 shackled men, some who were dead, some who were screaming, some who were sitting in their filth, sat worshippers of God, some of whom were slave traders and owners.

They sang, they read the Bible, they knelt and prayed, and they probably took up offerings for the less fortunate. And the slaves could hear their worship, and the worshippers could sometimes hear the slaves crying out.

The evil and the suffering and the humiliation and the overwhelming injustice, the people in the chapel were numb to it. They were numb to what was beneath them.

Worship upstairs, slavery downstairs. Isaiah 58 forces us to grapple with a very serious set of questions.

If God were to look into the downstairs dungeons of my life when I'm worshipping upstairs, who would he find there? Notice not what, but who would he find there?

[7 : 45] Who are the people that I overlook or that I oppress or that I use or that I keep down for my own advantage? Where have I sought to bury and to hide my iniquity with my piety, rather than repenting of my iniquity and acting justly?

See, God is very sensitive throughout the whole Old Testament and the New Testament, for that matter, to the ways in which our hearts are slippery and our religious practices can become profoundly self-serving.

Here we learn that without genuine repentance, religion can simply devolve into a way of hiding our wickedness and assaging our consciences.

And this is what Lent is all about, God exposing what we so often hide. Because only when it's exposed and brought to the light can it actually be forgiven and healed.

And lest we think that we're above such heinous cruelty and injustice, like that was then, that's not now, it's important to understand what is the hidden motivation that actually leads to such acts of cruelty.

[8 : 51] It is not hatred for others primarily. I think it's a heart that's set on pursuing our own personal pleasures above all else. And if money is our primary pleasure, then we will overlook the poor to gain and keep it.

If power is our primary pleasure, then we will distort the truth in order to attain and protect it. And if freedom is our primary pleasure, then we will ignore and oppress anyone who limits it or questions it.

See, three times in our passage, this word for pleasure shows up. So in verse three, behold, in the day of your fasting, you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers.

And then twice more at the end of the passage in verse 13, if you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, if you honor it, not going your own ways or seeking your own pleasure or talking idly, and so we discover in Isaiah 58 that the spiritual problem at the heart of social injustice is this.

We have made the gratification of our personal desires the most important thing in our lives. And it is little wonder, then, when meeting the needs of others becomes a very low priority for us.

[10:20] And it's little wonder when we do not experience much joy or satisfaction in fellowship with the God who cares for the orphans and the widows, the God who cares for the families. The God who cares for the sinners. The God who cares for the prisoners.

The God who cares for the prisoners free. And the God who exalts the humble. The point is piercing, but it is simple. Worship and oppression do not mix in God's kingdom.

Piety without justice does not please the heart of God. See, we've come here on Ash Wednesday to be reminded of our physical mortality.

From dust you came, and to dust you shall return. But I want to suggest that even more, we've come to be reminded of our spiritual morbidity. The sickness that leads to death.

It's what Hebrews calls the hardening of the heart by the deceitfulness of sin. And you can hear it also in the psalm that the Hebrews preacher quotes, pleading with God's people.

[11:21] Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. You can hear it. God's yearning for his people in Ezekiel. God does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live.

And this same heartbeat of God pursuing his people, even as he is confronting them with their sins, he gives them at the very end of Isaiah 58 a picture of all that they will experience at the hands of God if they actually turn to him and live.

It's an image of feasting on the Sabbath. If you hold to the fast that I choose, says God, then you will experience a feast that I prepare.

Verse 13. If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, and the holy day of the Lord honorable, if you honor it not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly, then, verse 14, then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth.

I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. It's a picture of Sabbath rest, delighting God and fed by God and exalted with God.

[12:47] Sabbath is that fasting from work in order to feast on God. Sabbath is that time every week when we lay down our control and our agendas, when we lay down our impulses to produce, and gain, and earn, and protect, and we just remember that all that we have is gift from God.

And we align our heart's desires with his desires, and our lives with his lives, and we just delight, and we commune, and we feast, and it's a picture of the true rest that God made us for.

This relational richness and righteousness for which we are being redeemed. And so we discover from Isaiah 58 that Lent is an invitation to a fast that leads to a feast.

It is an invitation to a repentance that leads to rest. And this is the theme that holds together all our Ash Wednesday readings this evening. Rest is the final picture of Isaiah 58.

Rest is the ultimate promise of Hebrews 3 and 4. And rest is the gracious invitation of our Lord in Matthew 11, where Jesus himself says to us, Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

[14:03] Something that he's about to make possible through his sacrificial death and his triumphal resurrection. So, my brothers and sisters, as we conclude, I have to ask you, have you been laboring for a food in your life that does not satisfy?

Have you been carrying the weight of shame that will not be lifted? Have you been heavy with burdens that you did not choose and with which you cannot cope? Have you lost pleasure in the religious practices that you thought would bring you a sense of God's pleasure?

Have you become so absorbed with your own worries and your own anxieties and your own desires that you have grown numb to the sufferings and needs of others around you? Because if that is you tonight, and I'm assuming that it's maybe some of us, I invite you to the observance of a holy Lent, a season of prayer and fasting and self-examination, a season to feast with your Savior in the wilderness, a season to remember that you were not made to live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, a season to experience the rest that God offers you and

that He alone can give you, and a season to slow down and linger in repentance as we await the joy of resurrection.

My brothers and sisters, may this be so in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[15 : 47] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.