

God's chosen fast

When I was a kid the only time I heard the word "fast" was from Catholic friends sometime around Easter. They



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talked about giving up chocolate or movies until after Easter. Made no sense to me! But Isaiah's words are faith underlined, in capital letters, highlighted in red, shaped in the bold action of living, leaving religious words and usual rituals behind.

For followers of Christ, fasting is much more than a symbolic ritual, it is interrupting a familiar, enjoyable routine of your life to make room for a deeper understanding of how much God loves you and the importance of inviting the Spirit to shape and use your life to make a difference for others.

Isaiah reminds us that fasting is not the fast track to super spirituality but a focus on seeing beyond our comfort to bringing hope to those in real need. Today's text clarifies the purpose of fasting: "Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family?" (58:1-2).

I am reading these holy words against the unholy background of my world. I am thinking of the young man sitting on the other side of my church every Sunday. He sleeps at a homeless shelter, has been robbed more than once while taking a shower, constantly looks for work and does not go back where he was raised because there are no jobs in that little town. I am thinking of the woman in my Sunday School class, about 50 years old, living in a drab two-room apartment, drawing a disability check and trying her best to make it from day to day. I'm thinking of an African-American woman living in Ferguson, Mo., who works two jobs, helps her grandkids and wonders why her world is constantly in upheaval, and there seems to be scant hope.

I'm hearing Isaiah's words with new

clarity, understanding that giving up dark chocolate for Lent is not a meaningful sacrifice for me this year. My fast will be to give up my usual religious habits and make myself pay attention to the world and people around me while seeking ways I can make a difference.

Isaiah 56-66 is directed at the exiles who returned from Babylon to Judea. They found a Temple in ruin and Jerusalem's walls reduced to rubble. The glory days were over and the world around them was still threatening. But they dreamed of restored splendor and God's blessings, devoting themselves to prayer and rituals. But God's response seemed slow in coming.

If they prayed fervently and returned to the thinking and political structures of David and Solomon's days would not all be as it had been? Isaiah answers that – without a change of heart, a concern for the downtrodden and impoverished, without a faith that changed how they lived – there would be no more Jerusalem or new world.

This text is not a foundation for "bleeding-heart religion," not a manifesto for a welfare state, not a call to a society where people live under a benevolent dictatorship with controlled income. This is a picture of God's people caring for one another, for justice tempered by grace, for a society in which God is present and where it is possible to overcome injustice.

Human nature sees religion as an avenue of respectability and satisfaction, a balanced system that offers rewards and protection from trouble and failure. The Jerusalem Temple was not a monument to Israel's glory but a reminder of God's presence and blessings. The rituals were not an exercise to win blessings but a reminder of God's gracious love and his call to live out that love in their actions and relationships.

Authentic worship is not detached from life. Worship includes gratitude to God and surrender of your life to him, and translates into making a

Formations

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difference in the world outside the church walls.

Jesus' preaching took two forms: challenging words and surprising actions. He could debate with the greatest scholars of the Law (Mark 12:13-34), forgive a tax collector (Luke 19:1-10), heal a blind man (John 9:1-11) and point a Pharisee to spiritual life beyond keeping the Law (John 3:1-15).

There is no greater evidence that we truly worship God than our treatment of others every day. Isaiah describes this as when "you open your heart to the hungry and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted," then "your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the moon" (v. 10). "You will be called Mender of the Broken Walls, Restorer of Livable Streets" (v. 12). This is a remarkable contrast to the exiles' passion to rebuild the Temple and city of Jerusalem.

Isaiah heaps powerful images on top of images if they will be a people of compassion and benevolent action, concluding, "I will let you ride on the heights of the earth; I will sustain you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob. The mouth of the Lord has spoken" (v. 14).

Of course, we are like the people who first heard Isaiah's message. So we must ask ourselves, "How will we translate our faith outside the church walls? Are we able to see peoples' needs, and what will we do to make a difference? Are we truly dependent on God, grateful for his grace every day? Do our financial records reflect a concern for those in need?"

What will you give up this Lenten season as a reminder that you can make a difference to a person living with loss, need or simply loneliness? May the grace of God be reflected in your worship inside and outside the walls of the church.

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