



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Repairer of the Breach”

Isaiah 58:1-12

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The Old Testament book of Isaiah exists in three movements. The first is a word of warning to the people of Judah. The warning goes largely unheeded, and the people are eventually defeated, taken into exile in Babylon. The second movement seems to come from the voice of an exile, preaching the hope of eventual return home. And then in the last movement, focus shifts towards the people who have returned. They’ve come back to the ruins of their beloved home and have to figure out how to put themselves back together and move forward as a community.

This is what God says to them, through the voice of the prophet. Hear these words from Isaiah, chapter 58.

¹Shout 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.

²Yet 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.

³“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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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?

⁶ 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?

⁷ 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?

⁸ 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.

⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

¹¹ The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.



The walls have crumbled. That's the first thing you notice as you approach the city. Stones are scattered where you assume they must have fallen all those years ago when the walls were breached, when the city fell. No one has had the will to move them. This is your homecoming. You have returned to Jerusalem, the city of your people, the city of your God. You walk towards the city with your heart pounding, sending joyous expectation through your veins with every beat. But the walls have crumbled. The stones are scattered on the ground. And you would do anything to make things right again.

That feeling right there—that desperation to rebuild and restore, to find a renewed sense of belonging and security—I've felt that feeling before. I imagine you might be familiar with it, too. I think most of us have had times in our lives when you look around at your world and it seems like the walls have crumbled, like the center of your identity has shifted; when a relationship falls apart, or someone you love is making unwise decisions you can't control; when your financial situation is more than you can handle, or your anxiety or depression has once again gotten the better of you—you look around and it feels like the stones of your life are scattered on the ground, the walls completely crumbled. When you're feeling like that, it's a natural human impulse to latch onto the first thing you can think of that will bring back a sense of order, a sense of control; anything you think might heal you, might leave you feeling whole again.

That's where the people of Judah are at. They've just returned home to a decimated city and they're trying to regain equilibrium. They latch onto the first thing that might offer them a sense of security. "Aha," they think to themselves, "It was our lack of faithfulness to the ways of God that got us into this mess, so the way to get us out of it is to be as absolutely righteously pious as possible. If we can get our spiritual house in order—if we can structure our worship just right, if we figure out the exact right ways to pray and to fast, then, never mind that there are those among us whose stomachs are empty, if we worship the right way God will hear us, and everything will turn out fine."

But God isn't so easily fooled. God sees their outward performances of righteousness and says, "Wait, you think *this* is the kind of fast I want from you? After all you've been through—war and exile and devastation—you think that what I've wanted from you all this time is for you to look good at church? Yes, I want you to be righteous, yes, I want you to worship me and me alone, yes, I want you to be healed. But you have to understand—true healing isn't just a personal reality, true righteousness has nothing to do with how you pray, true worship is about taking care of those in need."

Throughout all of scripture, you find a balance between the personal call of faith and the social or communal call of faith. Faith is on the one hand a very personal endeavor. Moses, David, Elijah, Mary, Paul—all examples of people whose personal, spiritual experiences of the divine transformed their lives and the world around them. And then there are prophets, like Amos and Micah, and there are many of the teachings of Jesus that seem to say it doesn't much matter how spiritual you think you are or how good you look on the outside—what have you done lately for those around you who are in need?



It's good for us to listen to both voices, to hold in tension these two ideals of faith, the personal and the communal. We need them both. The interesting thing though about this passage from Isaiah is that while it seems to prioritize the communal nature of faith, at the core I think what Isaiah is saying is that at the heart of it, personal faith and its social expressions are inseparable. In Isaiah's framework, our spiritual and social realities are connected.

Isaiah says that in order for the people of Judah to be in true right relationship with God, in order for them to be spiritually in the right place, in order for God to hear them, they first must attend to the needs of the poor and the oppressed in their community.

I don't think Isaiah is talking about a tit for tat, karma kind of experience where I'm nice to you so that good things will come back to me, I give a quarter to a homeless person so that God will do me a favor. Isaiah is imagining a world where people are intrinsically connected to one another, where the health of the community determines my understanding of my own personal health, a world where my health, my wholeness, my healing depends on your health, your wholeness, your healing. Isaiah envisions a world where the only way for a person to be spiritually whole, the only way to be truly right with God is to participate in the making right of the world around you.

This isn't just an Old Testament prophetic value, either. Isaiah's vision helps us make sense of Jesus, too. When Jesus asks the disciples to make amends with their siblings before coming to the temple to pray, when he tells them that serving the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick is the same as serving Jesus himself, when he commands that even though it goes against our own interest we should love our enemies—Jesus is saying the same thing, too: our spiritual righteousness and our communal life together go hand in hand. I can't be spiritually healthy and whole if you don't have what you need.

The beautiful thing about the story of Jesus is that he doesn't just demand these things of us. He lives it. Jesus was as spiritually right with God as it is possible to be. Jesus was God. But he didn't consider equality with God as something to be exploited. It wasn't enough for him to be personally at peace if we weren't. He gave up everything so that we could be made whole, too. The repairer of the breach. The restorer of streets to live in.

Here in our own community we've been doing a lot of work—recently and for a long time—to try to live into this vision. For years our church has said that outreach to our neighbors in the form of life transforming resources and programs is our top priority in our giving. And just two weeks ago we began our Mission Build Campaign which will help four of our most significant mission partners do the work needed to, as Isaiah would put it, loose the bonds of injustice, shelter the homeless and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.

And still, there's so much more to be done. Sometimes if you look realistically at the needs of the world, even just at the needs our city, the task seems insurmountable. It's overwhelming. The wall has crumbled. The stones are scattered on the ground. Is there a way to make it right?



Sometimes it would feel easier to just come here to this sanctuary and worship on Sunday mornings, sing my favorite hymns, pray familiar prayers, and leave my personal spiritual experience at that. But that's not the kind of faith that we're called to.

Isaiah's words are this beautiful reminder that at the center of the Gospel is the truth that through the love of God we belong to each other. I can't separate my personal wellbeing from yours because the love of God breaks down all barriers, all divisions. The love of God builds up and redeems and restores—and calls us all to do the same.

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if you offer your food to the hungry
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Amen.

