

**Scripture Reading**    Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout 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.

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>“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.

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>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?

<sup>6</sup>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? <sup>7</sup>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?

<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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,

<sup>10</sup>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.

<sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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.

### **Scripture**

The book of Isaiah is maybe one of my favorite books of the Bible. Within this book are some of the most beautiful, awe inspiring images that describe our relationship with the Divine. Also within this book are **pages and pages** of condemnation, rebuking of sins, and punishment.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures there is a prominent theme of **faithfulness to God**. If you keep this in mind when reading the texts, you'll understand what's going on a little better. Take the Garden of Eden for example. Adam and Eve do not listen to God; this means punishment and expulsion from the garden. Noah's generation does not listen to God; death was the punishment...except for Noah, who listened. Make an idol? Punishment. And now, here in Isaiah, we have the Jewish people who have been scattered and held captive by neighboring empires, according to the Scriptures, because they **were not a faithful** people. And so here, in the 58<sup>th</sup> chapter, we have the Lord

speaking through the prophet to the exiled Jewish people, once again discussing where these people have gone wrong.

God says 'Look, you serve your **own interest** on your fast day, and **oppress** all your workers.' The people have been judged guilty of yes, being religious, but practicing their faith in an unrighteous manner—they have been faking it.

But God does not simply say, 'Oh well, tough cookies.' God responds with a **teaching moment**, of what walking in faith **should** produce in one's life: <sup>6</sup>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? <sup>7</sup>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?

Then the beautiful imagery of Isaiah returns in the words of the prophet: <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and **the Lord will answer**; you shall cry for help, and he will say, **Here I am**.

Here I am. The God of love says to you this evening, in the midst of our harmful behaviors, in the midst of our broken relationships, in the midst of our mortality...  
**here I am.**

Just as a young infant learns to play ‘peek a boo’; the first time you cover your eyes, they don’t **quite know how to respond**. And this is just how our relationship with God is, especially when we walk in this season of Lent. There are times in our lives where we don’t quite know where God went. Some respond with fear, others with sadness, still others with anger.

When was it that you last questioned God’s presence in your life? How did you respond? But just like the infant who learns that we **do not disappear** from existence when we cover our eyes, they learn to **anticipate with joy and excitement** the return of your ‘peek a boo’ response.

So too, we learn in our faith journeys that even in the darkest moments of our lives, when we were wondering whether or not God really does exist, we have learned by faith and trust that there will be a ‘peek a boo’ moment. God is with us. God **is with you**. Waiting for you to lower your hands, your defenses, your illusions of what it means to be ‘religious,’ and just open your eyes. **Here I am. Follow me.**

## **Response**

We are called by God **to draw close** this Lenten season. The prophet Isaiah warns us of our temptations to turn our faith into meaningless actions, but then he shares with us what this drawing close to God may look like in our lives if done faithfully. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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.

Yes, tonight we celebrate the finitude of our human lives. Tonight we come before God to confess our brokenness in our lives. Tonight **we begin the season of Lent with ashes**, the symbol of mortality and repentance.

And tonight, in the darkness, in the dirt, in our humility, we remember the words of the prophet Isaiah, and seek to faithfully draw close to God on our life's journey. And we'll continue the journey these 40 days as we look to the **cross of Jesus** on Good Friday; the day where **we realize our forgiveness**, as we seek to draw close to our savior. And throughout this journey, it is my prayer that you call upon the Lord in your brokenness, and hear the life-giving words in your heart: **here I am**.