

Sermon Text – Sunday, August 24, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Jeremiah 1:4-10; 2nd Reading: Hebrews 12:18-29
Scripture for the message: Isaiah 58:4-14 “If you . . .”

The Israelites who first heard these words, like us, had a tough time accepting that God did have real expectations of them. This passage dates to a time when the Israelites returned from exile to live in the land but did not yet master obeying the laws of God. They did not learn to do justice for the poor and they did not yet learn to practice holiness in a way that was pleasing to God. The community was more concerned with who would and who would not be allowed to remain in their new society – sounds familiar in today’s societal settings as well.

We have read the word of the Lord through Isaiah’s prophecies. These prophecies are God’s promises to respond to God’s people. However, the Israelites to whom Isaiah directs his words are still under the law of Mt. Sinai. Their perception of God then is the voice that seizes the heart with terror, and the cloud of fire that settles on the mountain when God is present. A God that punishes by whisking them off into exile in a foreign land. Still, they failed to obey the laws of their God. They trampled the sabbath and they served their own interests. They were not sure how to correctly observe sabbath law since the invading Babylonian armies destroyed their temple. These words from the Lord offer instruction on how to center their religious practices by doing works of mercy and justice. The sabbath is about honoring God, not merely a day to get out of work – and the people could observe sabbath everywhere and anywhere not just in a temple.

“If you offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted” – this is a calling to complete the work Jesus started. Remember Jesus’ words, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” As Christians and people created in the image of God this is also our work. To emphasize this, the Lord, through Isaiah’s words, tells us that “if you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests, . . . if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth.”

This is absolutely about honoring God, not only on the Sabbath a day set aside to worship God but also in our everyday lives. What better way to worship the creator than to care for creation – to care for those who are created in

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God's image, as Jesus does when he healed the woman in the synagogue. His actions were condemned by the leader of the synagogue as illustrated in Luke's Gospel chapter thirteen. Not only does the synagogue leader condemn Jesus, but the leader also scolds the crowd saying, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." Jesus calls out the synagogue leader by saying, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

Jesus shows us how to honor God by adhering to the "spirit" of God's commandments. By this time in Judea, the hard-liners in the debate about correct Sabbath observance insisted on ever more restrictive activities. Jesus, however, prefers to employ the principle of waiving Sabbath law for the purpose of preserving life. Is life not more important than regulation? This principle is voiced by Isaiah's words – God desires that we center our religious observances on "satisfying the needs of the afflicted" not on "Pursuing your own interests on God's holy day." By healing the woman in the synagogue, Jesus places himself squarely in the tradition of Isaiah, advocating that all religious life should seek to produce justice.

Isaiah asks the question of the Israelites, "Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves?" Another way to put this question is why are you worshiping the way you do – what do you expect of your God? Like some of the synagogue leaders and Pharisees of Jesus' time – they seem to only want to get noticed so they can manipulate God to achieve their desired results. Maybe Isaiah's words were to a culture centuries apart from our own, but the message is clear – if you want to live in God's kingdom, then live right lives now.

We know that it is not our work that gives the promise of eternity. We know, or should know, that blessings are given freely to those who exhibit ethical behavior, treating others with respect, justice, and kindness. Somehow however, some people have gotten the impression that coming to church and writing a check or two is enough and only Sunday mornings matter – we can do as we please the rest of the week. The reality I think is that God does not really want our works, God wants our hearts.

Isaiah's words show that Israel's attempts at righteousness had become self-serving and oppressive. The "rule of law" was more important to the

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synagogue leaders than the “rule of love.” God calls for behavior that is self-forgetful and outward looking. “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil” and if you set the oppressed free. The words that the Lord gives to Isaiah describe how we should live our lives according to God’s will.

Considering what we are learning about this passage – there are two questions that come to my mind. What can we do as God’s people to draw on God’s power and strength as a shield and fortress? And what does God ask of God’s people? In the first few verses of what we read this morning we hear the Israelites lamenting to the Lord – “Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” Their prayers seem to be focused only on God noticing them and their works. God, through Isaiah, responds – “Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.” It seems that the Israelites felt that the mere act of “fasting” was all that was necessary for God to comply with their requests.

I wonder if they felt that performing some prescribed ritual was all God asked of them. Maybe we are a little like that – if we say the right words or stick to a script God will look at us in a better light. Here’s something I know however – “to repeat a set of words as though its mere repetition guarantees divine favor is the furthest thing from biblical faith.”¹ So the lesson is that it isn’t the words or the actions but the attitude that captures God’s attention. To answer one of our questions in a round-about fashion, God does not require empty rituals or self-serving sacrifice.

What does ask of God’s people? “To loosen the chains of injustice, to untie the cords of the yoke and to set the oppressed free.” The oppressed are those who are imprisoned by more than bars and locks but by the weight of institutions and regulations beyond their control including economic and religious. I wonder if what God requires is for us to live faithfully as if we were living in God’s kingdom right now. I wonder if what God requires from us is an attitude of humility – putting the needs of the community ahead of our own. I wonder if God requires truthfulness and integrity from God’s people. As I have said before, God is not interested in our works, God wants our hearts – God wants us to act justly, and to walk humbly. The prophet Hosea gave us God’s word, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”

¹ John W. Oswalt. *NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah*. Zondervan. 2003. Print. 626-627

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So, this then also answers the other question that came to my mind – What do we do to draw on God’s power and strength as a shield and fortress? First, we should live “right lives” and approach our prayer life and living with “right” attitudes. God knows when our efforts are manipulative – who are we fooling? God knows when our behaviors are not to express gratitude but to sway or influence God toward a desired effect. God knows what is in our hearts and responds when our hearts are righteous and our behavior ethical. So let a person examine their hearts.

When we expand this out to include the church – I wonder if God requires the body of Christ to help people live righteously and ethically and to illustrate for the world what that would look like. We should be raising people up and we should be more concerned with what we can do for others than what God can do for us. Our rituals and religious practices should not be designed to manipulate God into getting what we want but to give God our love and ourselves in grateful worship for what God does for us.