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The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

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“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.” In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In just a couple more weeks, we will be celebrating the beginning of Lent with the distribution of ashes and public repentance of our sins on Ash Wednesday. Usually assigned as a reading on that day, we hear Isaiah’s call today for communal repentance – a repentance not merely offered in a public ritual performance on fast days but with action rooted in the divine law, the Torah.

At the core of the Torah, as understood by both Jesus and Isaiah, is the call to love God with all our hearts, minds, and wills and to love our neighbor as ourselves. In the same way as the Israelites at the time of Isaiah’s writing were navigating the challenges of their return from exile – of rebuilding their collective identity as they physically rebuilt their communities, so we too are now working out as a nation, once proudly self-understood and still understood by some as a Christian nation, who we are and what it is we stand for. While our temptation for this approaching time of reflection and repentance may be to keep it focused inward, our witness as well as our call to repentance, is just as communal and collective in nature as the one that Isaiah is calling for in our first lesson today.

Isa 58:1 launches a prophetic message to a community gone astray. The verse begins with God’s command to a prophet to call out with his throat and to “not hold back!” The prophet’s urgent, full surrender to God’s message is given a public, ritual character with the command: “lift up your voice like a trumpet,” or more accurately, “like a shofar.” The shofar is a musical instrument made from a ram’s horn, which was used in ancient Israel to gain community-wide attention, whether for alarm or for communal activity. Here the prophet, likely from the margins, has been ordered to sound the alarm on a community-wide failure or sin.

What is this sin? In v. 2 we learn that Israel, God’s people, “seek” and “delight” to worship God. Yet this delight or pleasure is an idolatrous perversion of true worship. Rather than taking delight in the “ordinance of their God,” they take pleasure in the act of worship itself, separating it from righteousness or good works. As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann points out, the people’s

worship is “an act of self-indulgence void of ethical content.” True worship must be centered on the teachings of the Torah, the divine law.

As we can guess from God’s indignant response, the people’s petitions for “righteous judgments” and their attempts to “draw near to God” are a complete misunderstanding of who God is. Their “delight,” therefore, is not for the one true God, but for their “own interests.” This passage of Isaiah decries the hypocrisy of self-serving worship – worship in which people set their own terms for engaging with God, making God small, pleasant, manageable. For although they “humble” themselves with ashes and sackcloth, the people do not notice the contradiction of their life with the desires of the God they claim to worship.

The prophet goes on to denounce violent socioeconomic practices that deny some community members access to resources necessary for life as the people strike “with a wicked fist” and “oppress their workers.” God calls on the people, instead of fasting, to “loose the bonds of injustice” and “let the oppressed go free.” Again we see an emphasis on economic exploitation as the term ‘yoke’ likely refers to disproportionate indebtedness and ‘undo’ and ‘let go free’ means to cancel paralyzing debts. The prophet points to the stark, material injustice in their society as evidence that the people and their worship are spiritually bankrupt.

Because while God’s demand to “share your bread with the hungry” and “bring the homeless poor into your house,” is ethical, it is also deeply spiritual and theological. It is a necessary act of healing, which Isaiah says will not only heal our communities but also our relationship with God. In v. 8, the prophet proclaims, “your vindicator shall go before you,/ the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard,” recalling God’s guidance of the young nation of Israel through exodus out of Egypt. And in the beautiful imagery of v. 11, the prophet promises that God will “satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong;/ and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water,” recalling God’s deliverance and provision in the wilderness, but this time with “waters [that] never fail.” Here God is the primary actor, not Israel. If the people follow the Torah, loving their God and their neighbor as themselves, God will pour out blessings upon them, sustaining them for “many generations.”

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus uses two metaphors to exhort his listeners to good works, to faithful adherence to the divine law. First, he uses “salt,” which in addition to its importance as a seasoning and preservative, was also used in ritual sacrifices to symbolize the divine covenant made between God and God’s chosen people. And second, he uses “light.” Both images here are being used to convey

the ways in which the people of God are called to witness to God's nature of love, peace, and mercy. Notice that neither image is dramatic or glorious, but necessary goods – things that contribute to a common life. In keeping with his teaching in the Beatitudes, which we heard last week, Jesus is describing a new order, one that elevates the common and glorifies the servant.

As we re-commit ourselves to loving and following Jesus in the days and weeks to come, let us reorient ourselves to the fast that God has chosen for us – not one of merely spiritual, or ritualistic, or inward dimensions that leaves us feeling personally virtuous without actually costing us anything. But let us fast instead from indifference; exploitation; unjust gain. Let us fast from those companies, institutions, and personalities that hold cheap the lives and livelihoods of us and our neighbors. And let us recommit ourselves to loving and serving those who Jesus loved and served: the poor, the hungry, the homeless, and the naked. It is then that we will become God's church for the world: the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the city on the hill. It is then that our common and uncommon acts of mercy and compassion will become the love, mercy, and light of our Lord Jesus, incarnate, in this nation and in the world. Amen.