

REMOVE THE YOKE FROM AMONG YOU

Isaiah 58:1-12 ✕ Psalm 112:1-9 ✕ 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 ✕ Matthew 5:13-20

Sunday February 6, 2011 ✕ Epiphany 5A

The people complain that God is not paying enough attention to them. God responds that the people are not paying enough attention to each other.

Isaiah is an incredibly rich resource that has been preserved in the Hebrew Bible. Isaiah was written by more than one person over a period of several hundred years. The portion given us for today was written about the time when the people have returned to Jerusalem following their captivity in Babylon.

The chips were certainly down for the Hebrew people at the time in which these words are set. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was long destroyed. Their people either killed in an ethnic cleansing or else so forcibly relocated that for the last 2,500 years they have been known as the 'lost ten tribes of Israel'.

The Southern Kingdom of Judah had survived for a couple of more decades, before they too had been swept up in the ever-changing balance-of-power struggles that has plagued the Middle

East since the beginning of recorded history. Like their cousins to the North they eventually fell to foreign conquest. They were exiled in what has come to be known as their Babylonian Captivity.

But now they are back. Yet another change in the political landscape has caused a shift in the political fortunes in the super powers of the day, and the new king needs the Jews back in Israel, to act as a buffer on his southwestern flank, against Egypt.

By the time that Isaiah records this conversation between the God of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob and the people of Judah, Babylon is a bad memory, and the people have returned to Jerusalem. Only to find a landscape that has fallen into ruin over the decades they were gone. Jerusalem had been overthrown in the final battle and was still in ruins. Solomon's Temple was destroyed, the city walls were fallen, and things were generally a mess.

The leadership and the people have begun to try and reconstruct their lives as a nation once again. This a countryside that hasn't been farmed in over 70 years. Vines that haven't been tended. Olive trees that haven't been

taken care of. Livestock has gone wild. Things are not good.

We know that the peasants & farmers are in an increasing perilous situation. The wealthy are buying up more and more of the countryside, turning small landholders into subsistent farmers at best, serfs and near slaves, at worse. And as is almost always the case, the rich have gotten richer, and the poor have become poorer.

Isaiah begins with his mandate from God: Cry out God says. I know that my people are a rebellious people. They act like they are righteousness themselves, and they ask a righteousness judgment of me.

And so the people request a judgment God:

"Why God, do we fast, but you do not see? Why God, do we humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

It is a complaint lodged against God because of the lack of attention that God seems to be giving to the people's problems.

When we are the most honest with ourselves, that complaint lodged against God might sound pretty familiar.

"Gee whiz, God. I get to church almost every Sunday, but you still don't answer my prayers the way I want you to. How is it God, that I give all this time to sing in the choir, and teach Sunday School, and make coffee, and bring desserts, and make a pledge – and then you don't pay any attention when I want you to do something."

I don't know if that sounds like any part of your prayer life, but I have to admit that it sound familiar me. There have been plenty of times in my life when I've found myself caught in the trap of thinking that I was somehow stacking up points with God. The more 'good stuff' that I did, then of course God would pay attention, and 'take care of me' when the chips were down.

You know the saying: never ask a question that you don't already know the answer to. That would have been good advice for the prophet Isaiah to have given to the people of Judah before they asked God, why didn't God see all of their fasting, and why didn't God notice how incredibly humble they were? God is ready with a response:

"You have got to be kidding! On those fast days that you are so proud of – you're only looking after you own

interests. You oppress your workers. You quarrel and fight and are always ready to throw a punch. If that's what you call fasting – don't expect heaven to pay much attention."

"Do you think," God says, "that's the kind of fasting that will get my attention? When you go to great public extremes and then say that you are being humble? You call that fasting?"

To say the least, God is in a mood!

"Here's the kind of fasting I'd like to see from you people:" God says. "Loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke. Share your food with the hungry, make sure the homeless poor have a place to live – in your own homes if necessary. When you see somebody naked, give them some clothes. Try fasting like that, God says, and your healing will come quickly. When you call, God will answer. Then you cry for help, God will say 'Here I am.'"

It's an intriguing outline of faith in action that we have from Isaiah. The people complain that God is not paying enough attention to them. God responds that the people are not paying enough attention to each other.

These stories have not been preserved in Scripture as interesting historical anecdotes. They have been kept for us – for thousands of years – because they are – or least they can be – still alive for us today.

Our relationship with God is shaped and formed and framed by our relationships with each other. God is best glorified by us when we are a people who help to shape our neighborhoods, our cities, and our societies to be places where no one is hungry, nobody is cold in the winter, and nobody lives under a bridge. When we remove that yoke our sight and our lives are transformed. When we remove that yoke what we presently might see as our limited resources becomes God's more than enough.

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

Those are complaints that the people of God have lodged against Heaven over and over again. We strain and strain to get our religion 'just right' – and expect God to take notice, and then give us what we want.

God tells us not to worry so much 'getting our religion just right.' God tells us to spend a little more time loving our neighbor as ourselves.