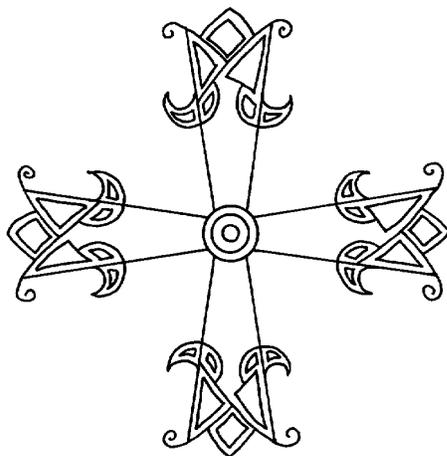


**THE REV. STEPHANIE
E. PARKER
SERMON**



February 6, 2011

Isaiah 58 1-12 Epiphany 5 2011
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

The Fast That I Choose

Last week I broke what might be the surprising news that the practice of religion very often just gets in God's way and that our understanding of God's will as told through scripture is frequently misapprehended and distorted by a lot of well meaning religious types.

And I mentioned that an ongoing theme in scripture was that God actually has very little interest in religion itself, that in fact, God is concerned far less with religion than with how those of us who profess love of God show that love in and to the world around us. That theme continues today.

I think it is important to point out that we must not confuse God's disdain for empty religion with God's desire for us to gather as a community for worship. God formed us for community and calls us always to common worship.

But God is constantly reminding us that we are not meant to be strangers to one another and most especially we are never to forget that our community is not enclosed within the boundaries of our religious institutions, but also includes the man selling copies of Real Change in front of the grocery store and the mentally ill people we try to ignore as we pass them on the street.

The world, in which we live, just like ancient Israel, is still full of people who are fragile and broken. So God still calls to us, generation after generation, to claim the fullness of God's loving justice and mercy and share it with a world in need.

In Isaiah we witness God's continuing presence and promise of action to a people caught up in troubled times. For the Israelites, their long period of crushing exile has ended, and

they have returned from exile in Babylon. God's promise to bring them home has been fulfilled, and they have even witnessed the reconstruction of their beloved Temple. But troubled times have continued. In the years since their return, they have experienced years of unstable economy and an ever increasing gap between those who have wealth and power and those who have not. Then, just as today, problems of this kind create social violence and social disorder. It creates social dis-ease.

The people of Israel have indeed been restored to the Promised Land, but they have become lost in self-interest and empty elaborate worship. They worship with zeal, but ignore God's wish for compassionate justice. God's prophet sounds the alarm and we hear. God's Word breaking into the world to call us into a deeper understanding of what it really means to be God's people.

God indicts empty worship. God knows that empty worship serves no one; least of all those speak God's love with their lips while people lie ignored and hungry on their doorstep. God desires worship that penetrates the heart and moves us to acts of compassion and justice.

So God's Word, spoken through the prophet, pierces the gloom that overshadows the hearts of Israel, and God issues the invitation for the people to return to the Light. God calls us back into a vision of faith in which all people share in God's abundance.

With this invitation, we hear the good news that God still has much hope for this world that God created and much hope for all of God's people---both those who are hungry and those whose eyes and hearts are closed to their plight.

God's words sound harsh, but God never condemns us without a promise of restoration--- God never leaves us groping blindly for a way back into God's favor. Through the Prophet, God mercifully communicates the meaning and nature of true worship. True worship, Isaiah tells us, is that which liberates, nurtures, and transforms us --- all of us--- into a deeply compassionate community.

We are invited to leave our worship today with new eyes to see those in our world that are hungry for God's mercy and justice. Today we remember that our worship of God in this wonderful and holy place is not fully complete until we have joined with Christ and extended ourselves to others who also deserve a deep share in God's amazing abundance. What we are doing right now as we gather in here this morning is only the opening act in a two act play. Our worship this morning does not end when we say "Alleluia, Alleluia! Go in peace to love and serve the world" ---that's simply when the second act begins!

In here we remember that we are partnered with God's purposes and this knowledge saves us from feeling overwhelmed by the events in our world and allows us to be refreshed and restored - inspired, in fact, to be God's emissaries to a world that needs to hear some Good News.

God asks us to take an inventory of our abundance - abundance that, for many of us, is both material and emotional - and in seeing and identifying the incredible abundance we possess, to resolve to spread the wealth.

This is how we avoid the potential trap of empty, self-serving worship. This is how we insure that we have aligned ourselves with God's desire that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

None of us ever intend to get lost in self interest, but God knows that when we get caught up in the pressures of life it is so easy to get lost in self preservation. As individuals and as a community of faith this is our greatest threat.

But when we worship with deep intention, when we put aside our self absorption and striving we are able then to keep God's purposes at the center of our lives. This kind of communion with God creates true worship, restores community and heals the wounds that divide our families and our world.

The people of Israel that first received the poetic words of God's Prophet had become lost in such self interest. So God decisively acts to impart the news that, indeed, true healing and meaningful worship of God is expressed primarily in reckless generosity and compassion.

Now is the time to give up our fear of never having enough to rejoice instead in the deeper truth that in fact we have more than we ever need and even more to share. How rich does *our* worship and communal life become when we, as a gathered faith community fully grasp that our relationship with God cannot be separated from our relationship with other people—especially the least and the lost.

Today we hear emphatically that God wants to shatter the illusion that our worship is simply a private matter between ourselves and God:

"Is not this the fast that I choose?" God asks us again today, "To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, and let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to cover them, and not hide yourself from your own kin?"

True worship is that which delights in God and is inseparable from a life of generosity, justice and compassion.

This was God's Word to a people torn and frightened by the sometimes harsh realities of life - life in a world that has not yet achieved God's full perfection --- and these are God's Words to us here today

In these days of our own potential havoc and self-preoccupation, God still speaks to us, God still has unlimited hope in us, and God utterly delights in those moments when take the time to wed our hearts and minds to God's abundant grace and boundless justice.

So on this morning we too might pray that our own illusions about religion and worship be shattered, that we might always have the grace and courage to truly embrace one another as family, and that our love will be so great as to be impossible to conceal like a great city built on a hill! Amen.

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