Isaiah 58:3-9a
Epiphany 5A + February 9, 2014
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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There All Along

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 58:9: "Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. Where Are You, God?

Let’s start by being absurd. Let’s say that I decide I want to do something to show God what I’m willing to do for Him—you know, to get His attention and help. So after some serious thought, I decide that I will show God what I’m willing to do for Him by dropping heavy books on my bare toes. God has not commanded this: it is what I have chosen, and I therefore expect that God will respect my choice and reward me for it. As anticipated, this is not an enjoyable activity. In a very short time, I’m in quite a bit of pain. Because I’m in pain, I start to snap at other people. I stop caring about their welfare. I also grow quite angry at God because I don’t see Him helping me any more than I was before, and now my toes hurt.

Replace dropping books on toes with fasting, and that’s what the people of Isaiah 58 have done. "Where are You, God?! Why don't you respect our efforts?" That's how our Old Testament lesson begins. The words are a little different: "Why have we fasted, and You see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and You take no knowledge of it?" The people of Israel can't figure out why the Lord isn't paying attention to them. They've done everything they can think of. They've pulled out every stop. In fact, they've gone so far that they're fasting.

So, a quick word about fasting. Fasting is about self-denial. It's about depriving yourself of things that are necessary or enjoyable. Why do it? There are a couple of good reasons, and those reasons line up with the two greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind;" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

When it comes to loving God, the self-denial of fasting is an acknowledgment that every good gift comes from God. It's to acknowledge that you're a sinner who doesn't deserve any good gift whatsoever, and to reflect upon how weak you are apart from the Lord. You and I so easily take for granted things like strength and vitality. So skip a meal or three: ponder the hunger, the headache, the weakness; and then give thanks all the more for God's gift of daily bread.

When it comes to love for neighbor, fasting can remind you to help those who are less fortunate. It's no fun to go hungry: so when you skip a meal or two voluntarily, it hopefully reminds you that lots of folks around the world skip meals involuntarily, simply because there is no food to eat. I've met some folks, for instance, who will skip a meal once a week or so; and then they take the money they would have spent on the meal and quietly donate it to charity. That's a good use of self-denial: when we deny ourselves things that we could have—be it food or a night out or the latest gadget or whatever, it means that we have more that we can use in service to others. That's how fasting and self-denial lead to love for your neighbor.

So here's what we've got so far: fasting is a good thing. It's about loving God and loving neighbor. God doesn't require it of you: He hasn't commanded it, and He doesn't love you more if you fast or fault you if you don't. It's simply a good exercise if you so choose. In fact, fasting was rare in the Old Testament: God only commanded the Israelites to fast once a year—for the
Day of Atonement. Once a year: that’s all. He never said He’d be pleased if they fasted more often: that’s their idea, not His. It’s better than dropping books on their toes; but all the same, they’re trying to prove their dedication to God by keeping a command He hasn’t given. That’s almost where the problems begin.

Almost, but not quite. The real problem is that they’ve forgotten about His gracious presence with them. They’ve forgotten that He’s not a god far away who needs to be flattered into coming down and helping, but that He’s a God who dwells with them and wants to give them all good things freely. Almighty God is near: even as He is in heaven, He also dwells with them in the Most Holy Place of the temple. Because they’ve forgotten His presence and grace, they’re trying to get His attention by fasting—if it pleased God for them to do it for the Day of Atonement, they reason, why wouldn’t it please Him any other time? So they fast, but it seems to do no good; and so they cry out, “Why have we fasted, and You see it not?” In other words, “Where are You, God? Why aren’t You responding?”

The Lord answers and tells them why: “Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.” The problems multiply. Remember that fasting is supposed to be about self-denial, about learning love for God and neighbor? When these people fast, it isn’t about that at all. It isn’t about acknowledging their weaknesses and limitations. It’s about doing it because they think they have to do it, and they’re pretty unhappy about the inconvenience. So if they have to be miserable with hunger, they’re going to feel better by spreading the misery around. They’re going to start quarrels, pick fights, maybe even give the hired help a good beating.

So imagine a servant tending the crops. He cheerfully greets the master when he arrives, and the master whacks him upside the head. The servant cautiously asks, “What was that for?”, and the master explains through clenched teeth, “I did that because I’m fasting to please God!”

Rather than love their neighbor, their growling stomachs have them spoiling for a fight. Rather than love God, they’re breaking His commands. So when God answers, He rebukes them and then defines the sort of “fast” that is acceptable to Him. The self-denial He calls for is service to others. Instead of inventing what God hasn’t commanded, do what He has commanded. Work to loose the bonds of wickedness and help the oppressed go free. Share your bread with the hungry, provide a place for the homeless and clothes for those in need. That’s self-denial, as in putting others before yourself.

In other words, God calls them to repent. He calls them to turn from the fasting they’ve invented to extort His help, and to turn back to His Word. He tells them to stop abusing their neighbors and to love them instead. He calls them to turn from their sin. That’s what He’s saying in the text when He tells them to loose the bonds of wickedness and free the oppressed, and when He tells them to provide food, shelter and clothes to those in need.

That seems pretty simple: if you’re going serve God, do what God tells you to do.

But the Lord has saved the best for last. He says, “Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’”

When they have repented, the Lord will say, “Here I am.” He’s been saying it all along, but now they’ll hear it. It’s not that He’s been far away. He’s been there all along, waiting to give them His grace and mercy and help. When the people show love for their neighbors, it won’t be to earn forgiveness; it will be a sign that they have repented of their sin and that they’re living as
those who are forgiven by God who is right there—there with protection, healing and righteousness. It will be theirs from the God who hasn’t abandoned His people; but who faithfully, constantly says, “Here I am.”

II. Here I Am

The LORD says “Here I am” in a new way in the New Testament. He was close to them when He dwelt in the temple, but now He’s closer. He’s conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He’s in the flesh, walking among His people. As Jesus goes about His public ministry, He proclaims that the kingdom of heaven is near. Hand in hand with that proclamation, He also declares things like, “I am the Bread of Life,” “I am the Door,” and “I am the Light of the world.” With these statements, He is declaring that He is Yahweh, the great I AM, become man. With such words, He’s also declaring, “I AM is here;” or, “Here: I Am.”

Crowds gather because they believe the Word they’ve heard. They bring the blind, the deaf, the lame, the demon-possessed. They call out to Jesus, “Lord, have mercy,” and they don’t even stop to ask if they should fast or drop books on their toes to impress Him. They don’t have to. He hears their prayers and answers them. He doesn’t require works or payment. He does it freely, without cost. The Lord has come: here He is! The news is fantastic, and so people can’t wait to spread the news to friends and family and perfect strangers so that more might hear and believe.

But not everyone delights in Jesus: He mentions the scribes and the Pharisees at the end of our Gospel lesson: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” What’s wrong with this crew? The same as the people of Isaiah 58. They’re convinced that they have to get God’s attention and earn His favor by the works that they do. Like Isaiah 58, they’re big into fasting that God hasn’t commanded. They’re also big into all sorts of other rules that God hasn’t commanded: if you wash at all the right times and don’t pick grain on the Sabbath, they say, then God will draw near to you. It’s a sad situation for all sorts of reasons: for one, they’re trying to please God with a bunch of rules they’ve invented. For another and far worse, as long as they believe they need to draw near to God by their inventions, they’ll reject God who has drawn so near to them in the flesh that He’s sometimes sitting in their dining rooms. And when Jesus tells them to abandon their works that God hasn’t commanded and to trust in Him who is there, they’ll invent another way to try to earn God’s favor: they’ll conspire and have God-in-the-flesh crucified.

There He is, on the cross. What wonder: the Lord uses such betrayal and the death of His Son to win salvation for them. For us.

And what comfort that is, because this pattern of sin doesn’t just happen in Isaiah and the Gospels. It is very much a part of the sinful nature that afflicts all, you and me included. The Lord is not far away: the same God who says “Here I am” at the temple and in the flesh still says “Here I am” today, and He tells you exactly where. “Here I am in the Word. Here I am in Holy Baptism. Here I am in My Supper. Here I am, present to give grace and life freely, without cost.” It’s why you and I flock here, because here He is.

The temptation will be to believe that He is found or draws near in some other way. There are still plenty of people who believe that God will draw near by the works that they invent: isn’t every false religion an attempt to get to God in a way that He hasn’t commanded? You’ll always be tempted to believe that God will hear and draw near and help if only you do some extra thing to get His attention. The whole time, He’s present in His Word and sacraments, saying, “Here I am with grace and healing and life, won by My sacrifice on the cross. Why do you invent works to draw Me out, when I’ve already done all to draw you in?”
Especially as Lutherans, we ought to know that God doesn’t draw near because of our works: a big part of the Reformation was getting rid of indulgences, fasts, vows and other inventions of man purported to please God. But the temptation still sneaks in. Even though you know you’re saved solely for the sake of Jesus, you’re still tempted to invent works like, “God is more likely to answer my prayer if I help my neighbor a little extra today,” or “God will let me bag a big elk if I recite Scripture and pray while I’m waiting in the woods.”

You’ll be tempted to try to draw near to God by looking inside to your hearts and your feelings, but God has never promised nor commanded this. It’s popular to believe that God is near when you feel Him near, and that He delights whenever you do what feels right in your heart. But as comforting as that may feel, finding God in your heart is a work that is invented by man. The far better news is that the Lord is present in His means of grace to redeem you from the sin that your heart comes up with.

It’s likewise popular to believe that you can draw near to God in nature, that a trip to the mountains is where you can commune with the Almighty. I’ll admit that I rarely experience peace of mind as much as when I’m knee-deep in a quiet trout stream. But if I become mystical enough that I believe that my journey into the hills is what brings God near, I’ve invented a work God hasn’t commanded and a result that God hasn’t promised. The far better news is that, even when my mind is far from at peace, the Lord is as near as His Word and His Sacraments, saying “Be at peace, for here I am for you.”

So you turn—you repent—from the idea that you draw near to God by your works, including works of emotion or mysticism. You rejoice that the same Lord who died for your sins still draws near in, with and under His means of grace. Jesus, the Light of the world, fills you with His light. All the good works that you do are not to summon Him near, but a reflection that He has already drawn near and saved you. That’s the joy of the Christian’s life that Jesus describes when He says, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” You’re set free to serve others, for God in heaven draws near to you, so near as His means of grace; and He says, “Here I am. And because I am here, you are forgiven for all of your sins.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen