

Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout loudly; don't hold back;

raise your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their crime,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 They seek me day after day,
desiring knowledge of my ways
like a nation that acted righteously,
that didn't abandon their God.

They ask me for righteous judgments,
wanting to be close to God.

3 "Why do we fast and you don't see;
why afflict ourselves and you don't notice?"

Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want,
and oppress all your workers.

4 You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast;
you hit each other violently with your fists.

You shouldn't fast as you are doing today
if you want to make your voice heard on high.

5 Is this the kind of fast I choose,
a day of self-affliction,
of bending one's head like a reed
and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes?
Is this what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 Isn't this the fast I choose:
releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke,
setting free the mistreated,
and breaking every yoke?

7 Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry
and bringing the homeless poor into your house,
covering the naked when you see them,
and not hiding from your own family?

8 Then your light will break out like the dawn,
and you will be healed quickly.

Your own righteousness will walk before you,
and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard.

9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here."

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the finger-pointing, the wicked speech;

10 if you open your heart to the hungry,
and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,
your light will shine in the darkness,
and your gloom will be like the noon.

11 The Lord will guide you continually
and provide for you, even in parched places.
He will rescue your bones.
You will be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water that won't run dry.
12 They will rebuild ancient ruins on your account;
the foundations of generations past you will restore.
You will be called Mender of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Livable Streets.

Psalm 51:1-17

Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

2 Wash me completely clean of my guilt;

purify me from my sin!

3 Because I know my wrongdoings,

my sin is always right in front of me.

4 I've sinned against you—you alone.

I've committed evil in your sight.

That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,

completely correct when you issue your judgment.

5 Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,

from the moment my mother conceived me.

6 And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;

you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.

7 Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;

wash me and I will be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and celebration again;

let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.

- 9** Hide your face from my sins;
wipe away all my guilty deeds!
- 10** Create a clean heart for me, God;
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!
- 11** Please don't throw me out of your presence;
please don't take your holy spirit away from me.
- 12** Return the joy of your salvation to me
and sustain me with a willing spirit.
- 13** Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,
and sinners will come back to you.
- 14** Deliver me from violence, God, God of my salvation,
so that my tongue can sing of your righteousness.
- 15** Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will proclaim your praise.
- 16** You don't want sacrifices.
If I gave an entirely burned offering,
you wouldn't be pleased.
- 17** A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.
You won't despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

"Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

2 "Whenever you give to the poor, don't blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. **3** But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing **4** so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

5 "When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that's the only

reward they'll get. **6** But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

16 "And when you fast, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. **17** When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. **18** Then you won't look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

19 "Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. **20** Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. **21** Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Sermon

- Why ashes?
 - They seem so destructive, so morbid.
 - Alfred, played by Michael Cain in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Night*: Some people, "can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to **watch the world burn.**"
 - The Narrator of Fight Club: "I felt like destroying something beautiful."
 - That's not what's happening today.
- But still...why ashes?
 - Even the scriptures today, Isaiah and Matthew, both indicate God's not expecting or demanding ashes!
 - Of course, they're talking about people who'd cover their entire faces, sometimes even their

entire bodies, with ashes, so this smudge on our foreheads isn't an affront to God's word.

- So, then, why ashes?
 - Because we're forgetful people. We're people that need signposts, need directions, especially on difficult journeys.
- Lent is a difficult journey.
 - Of course, few things worth doing are simple. In fact, within the difficulty of Lent, we find the beauty.
- The ashes serve as a reminder that this is a different season, a sign that this is a time unlike any other in the life of the church.
 - This dusty cross on our foreheads points toward the terrible road toward Christ's crucifixion, paved with the the dirt of humanity's sinfulness.
- Ashes turn us to repentance.
- While I love the outdoors, I certainly don't have a green thumb.
 - Most things I try to plant wither like the tree outside Ninevah after Jonah brought that great empire to their own repentance of sackcloth and ashes.
 - However, gardeners and scientists that I know tell me that certain soils to bear fruit. Soils with too much acid or not enough potassium benefit from plants ash, because the nutrients necessary for plant growth come from the plants burned.

- Perhaps ashes are just the fertilizer we need in our Instagram lives, a reminder that nothing is as perfect as the pictures we take, and **that God loves us even in the pictures that aren't worth keeping.**
 - Ashes are a sign that the failure of our old lives, the dumpster fire of that last relationship, the smoldering of that major you just left, the burning that you feel inside because you don't feel loveable or worthy, that the ashes from those experience are the fertilizer God will use to raise you up to bloom as new life.
 - After all, for a phoenix to rise, we need ashes.
- So, I invite you this season, to embrace the ashes of your life. There are healthy practices of fasting that don't require you to hate your body. There are healthy practices of repentance that don't ask you to despise yourself.
 - Instead, take the ashes as a sign that God's a gardner who won't let the failure of eden determine the failure of your future, but instead, will take the ashes from the Old Adam and infuse them into the soil of your life. You will bloom. You will grow. You will bear good fruit. All because God does not abandon us to the ashes of our lives.
- With that in mind, consider carefully the practices that you choose this season. Some of you may choose to fast, and that is a holy practice. If you struggle with body image issues, fasting can exacerbate those

problems, so choosing not to fast from food can be a holy choice too. Instead, take up a practice, like daily Bible or devotional readings, journaling, or coming to worship and meditation weekly during the season. Consider fasting instead from things like shopping for clothes, spending time on social media, or even choose an item every day that you don't use, and just get rid of it, whether donating or recycling it.

- Consider joining some of us in Embrace in two practices to promote more real human community:
- Do weekly 1x1s with people you don't normally spend time with. We have a 1x1 board that promotes interaction around the normalcy of life: meals in MDR, walks around campus, trips to the grocery store. Make these things meaningful by getting to know your siblings in faith.
- Download Moment or another phone usage tracking app to see both how much time you spend on your phone and what apps take up most of your time. If we can together realize how much of our lives we devote to gadgets, we can turn from these as idols and return them to their proper place as tools to keep us in relationship with one another.
- As we move toward the imposition of ashes, may they prove a sign of the repentance in this season to come and the fertilizer of the new life to which we are turning.