

“Choosing Teams”  
Based on Isaiah 58: 1-12  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
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Andrew Foster Connors, a Presbyterian pastor in Baltimore tells this story: “One year during Holy Week, a few Christians from well-endowed congregations in a major metropolitan area spent a night with homeless friends on the street. They were looking for the suffering Christ in the lives of those who spend their days and nights suffering from hunger, disease, and rejection. It was a chilly night, and rain rolled in close to midnight. Looking for shelter, the handful of travelers felt fortunate to come upon a church holding an all-night prayer vigil. The leader of the group was a pastor of one of the most respected churches in the city. As she stepped through the outer doors of the church, a security guard stopped her. She explained that she and the rest of their group were Christians. They had no place to stay and were wet and miserable, and would like to rest and pray. Enticed by the lighted warmth of the sanctuary, she had forgotten that her wet, matted hair and disheveled clothing left her looking like just another homeless person from the street. The security guard was friendly, but explained in brutal honesty, ‘I was hired to keep homeless people like you out.’ As the dejected group made their way back into the misery of the night, they knew they had found their suffering Christ, locked out of the church.”<sup>1</sup> Which group was performing the fast required by God? That of those in all-night prayer vigil or that of those in all-night vigil of solidarity with the homeless?

The scripture I just read, is from the book of Isaiah, one of the prophets to whom Jesus was referring when he said in the Gospel lesson read by Ron, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is not difficult to see how Jesus, with his teaching and ministry of feeding the hungry, healing the sick and caring for the outcast was influenced by the likes of Isaiah. But what do we know of Isaiah? What we find in our Bible as the book of Isaiah was written in at least three different time periods by at least three different authors. First Isaiah was written by the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem. Second Isaiah, was written about a century and a half later, in Babylonian exile with the writer foreseeing the return to Jerusalem. Third Isaiah, the source of today’s passage, is written after the return to Jerusalem, yet before the restoration of the Temple which had been destroyed at the by the Babylonians.

In this passage, the prophet contrasts *faithless* fasting with *faithful* fasting. Faithless fasting is that which is done as mindless ritual, or worse, to please God in hopes of getting something in return. “Such fasting,” the prophet declares, “will not make your voice heard on high.” Such fasting is not acceptable. Rather, God asks the rhetorical question, through the prophet, “Is not this the fast that I choose:/to loose the bonds of injustice,/to undo the thongs of the yoke,/to let the oppressed go free,/and to break every yoke?/Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,/and bring the homeless poor into your house;/when you see the naked, to cover them,/ and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” As it turns out, the fast God

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Foster Connors, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 318.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:17

requires, is not a fast at all. The fast God requires is not about refraining from eating or refraining from eating certain things, the fast that God requires is to work against the yoke of oppression and poverty and all the ills that come with them.

While the faithless fast is unacceptable and distasteful to God, those who participate in the faithful fast will meet their reward for as the prophet relates, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,/and your healing shall spring up quickly; /your vindicator 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 for help, and he will say, Here I am.”

“Here I am.” For those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked and comfort the sick God says, “Here I am.” We are reminded of a scene much earlier in Isaiah when the prophet tells of being in the throne room of God and when God asks, “whom shall I send?” Isaiah responds, “Here I am! Send me!”<sup>3</sup> Amy Oden, Dean of Wesley Seminary in DC notes that this repetition of, "Here I am" is used “to confirm the partnership of God with God's people. Isaiah reminds us that this is a God who (a) wants more than a formal relationship with the people, (b) expects us to be partners in bringing forth God's purposes and (c) is responsive to our choices. The good news is that God calls us, again and again, into God's own life.”<sup>4</sup>

Through the voice of the prophet God continues, “If you remove the yoke from among you,/the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,/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./The LORD will guide you continually,/and satisfy your needs in parched places,/and make your bones strong;/and you shall be like a watered garden,/like a spring of water,/whose waters never fail./Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;/you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;/you shall be called the repairer of the breach,/the restorer of streets to live in.”

The writer here uses the classic Hebrew if/then convention. As Oden explains, “*If* the people choose the fast God sets before them, *then* they will have the blessing they seek: light, healing, help, protection, satisfying of needs, and, most centrally, the presence and guidance of God among them. The people, individually and corporately, cannot have a full relationship with God without a just relationship with each other. One's piety is not disconnected from the rest of everyday life. When right relationship is pursued, God is among the people, ‘Here I am.’ The glory and holiness of God is made manifest in this kind of godly fast.”<sup>5</sup>

Now, a word of caution, because it is easy to hear from this scripture that if we do X, Y, and Z, then God will do wonderful things for us. This concept of “works righteousness,” is contrary to the Reformed theology belief in salvation through faith alone, by grace alone. There is nothing we can *do* to earn salvation, it is through faith alone that we are saved. But remember, one of the marks of the faithless fast is doing so just to make God happy, and with the goal of pleasing God and reaping rewards. The mark of the faithless fast is your heart in not in the right place. But with the faithful fast, when your heart is in the right place, you

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 6: 8

<sup>4</sup> Amy Oden, “Commentary on First Reading” Isaiah 58:1-9a [9b-12] for February 6, 2011. [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

want to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, shelter the homeless, and end oppression, not in hopes of getting something in return from God, but because it's the right thing to do. Because we care about our neighbor. Because we know that as long as anyone suffers, we all suffer. And yet, when we do so, God tells us through Isaiah, God will be with us. God will say, "Here I am." The faithless faster, tries to get God on their team. The faithful faster tries to get on God's team.

But this doesn't mean that fasts and other religious rituals are meaningless. Indeed, as one commentator notes, "Many of the ancient church fathers and members of religious orders fasted on a regular basis, but always the fast was connected to their life of prayer and good works. Fasting was a means of freeing one's self to receive the gifts of God, which were always intended for the common good."<sup>6</sup> The key is to make a connection between the emotional relationship with God through the ritual and the relationship with others through partnership with God, which we make by doing God's work of caring for those in need. We have a wonderful example of this today and on the first Sunday of each month, when we take communion together, a sacrament in which we re-commit ourselves to God and the Body of Christ, we also re-commit ourselves to God's mission, in collecting food for Fish,<sup>7</sup>

In a recent article titled, "Giving Up Half Of Our Possessions Made Our Family Whole,"<sup>8</sup> writer Kevin Salwin writes about what happened when his teenage daughter Hannah convinced her parents to literally sell what they had to give to the poor. He writes:

"Let's start with this: We know our family's decision looks a bit nutty. After all, how many families listen when their teenage girl insists they sell their house and give away half the money to charity? I'll admit, our project sounds goofy, impetuous, perhaps even irresponsible.

"But that's what we did. One day in Fall 2006, as we were stopped at a familiar intersection a mile from our Atlanta home, our then 14-year-old daughter noticed a beautiful black Mercedes on her right juxtaposed with a shabbily-dressed man asking for food on her left. Recognition turned to anger turned to action: At Hannah's urging to help shrink the disparities between the haves and have-nots in our society, we sold our dream house, moved into one half the size and began to give away half the proceeds to help people halfway across the planet.

"Now, 3 ½ years later, we are cheering as the subsistence farmers in Ghana are transforming their lives from poverty to self-reliance with the help of The Hunger Project, a New York-based nonprofit. And we are marveling at how our family has changed too."

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<sup>6</sup> Carol J. Dempsey, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 318.

<sup>7</sup> Community food bank.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Salwin, "Giving Up Half Of Our Possessions Made Our Family Whole," Co-Author, 'The Power of Half: One Family's Decision to Stop Take and Start Giving Back!', Posted: February 4, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kevin-salwin/the-slightly-absurd-thing\\_b\\_817480.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kevin-salwin/the-slightly-absurd-thing_b_817480.html)

Salwin goes on to describe the “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality his family had fallen into and the belief they had absorbed from our culture that if you love someone, you’ll spend money on them. If you love your child, you’ll provide for her the biggest, best house possible and anything her little heart desires. He writes:

“But when Hannah stopped our family's momentum that day in 2006, it forced us to reexamine those subconscious drivers that were forcing our spending decisions. How much was enough, we started wondering. What did we truly need? The answers jolted us. We had so much, we were so full of gifts. Hannah was highlighting the biggest thing we owned -- our house -- as being a symbol of our abundance, not scarcity. If that was, what else was? Our time, our money, our stuff. We had so much!...

“But a funny thing happened: In our big house, we stopped communicating. We'd scatter to different rooms, far from one another physically and spiritually. The house actually began to weaken our love, or at least our ability to express that love.

“So, when Hannah prodded us to sell that house, she was pushing us to reinstate our communication, our connection, our love. In our new, smaller, ‘half’ house, we live with each other instead of near each other. We interact more, engage more, talk more, debate more, touch more, love more.

“Oh, and one other thing: With the money we harvested from the sale of the big house, we're able to fund a new source of hope for more than 30,000 villagers in Ghana. Other humans on our shared planet waking up this morning with more opportunity for their own kids and grandkids.

“That's our expression of love.”

In the article, Salwin doesn’t mention the role faith plays in his life, if any. But based on today’s scripture, I would guess that God is a lot more pleased with their form of fasting than with people who go to church every Sunday and never their lift a finger to loose the bonds of injustice. And we can see how God is moving in the Salwins’ lives in response. Not only do they have the joy and satisfaction of knowing that they are helping thousands of people in Ghana, but they have the joy and satisfaction of having grown closer and stronger as a family.

We all know that this congregation excels when it comes to mission. But I want to challenge us, each as individuals, to examine our own lives and look for ways, no matter how small, that we can live more fully into God’s call to faithful fasting. I’m not asking anyone to go out and sell their home, I’m just asking you, and me, to find ways to implement changes in our own lives, large or small, to live more simply so that others may simply live. I’m just asking that we each find ways to faithful fasting in partnership with God.