



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

February 17, 2010
Ash Wednesday
Jim Sundholm

RCL: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
LM: Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14, 17; 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Sometimes it seems best to simply read the texts slowly, clearly, and well, and then sit down. It is almost as if the read word speaks and comments clearly on itself, and the speaker/preacher must be careful not to detract from the written word. Such it is with these passages for Ash Wednesday. Our challenge is to present them in a manner that does not detract from their intrinsic power and challenge.

I recall an occasion several years back when a pastor friend was reading the Isaiah 58 text in worship, preparing to preach from it. As he started to preach, he said, “I can’t.” He paused. Again he said, “I can’t.” He started to cry gently and said, “These words are beyond me, I can’t preach them.” In the following silence people spontaneously broke into similar confessions for about twenty-five minutes. It was an unbelievable worship experience.

On this day we face our frailty, our coming from and returning to dust, our sin. The texts call us to be conformed to the values and character of God. For Joel the call is to “rend your heart and not your clothing.” For Isaiah it is to “do” the fast that the Lord chooses. For the psalmist it is David’s desperate words about enduring the deep woes of sins past that literally bring him and us to a position of humility and brokenness before God. For Paul in Corinth it is engaging and demonstrating “the righteousness of God.” For Matthew it is recognizing that the “fast” is for you, it is about your internal life conformed to the “mind” of God and “storing treasures in heaven.”

Isaiah 58 longs for a new day, one not formed by defined circumstance of injustice and oppression but a day that God chooses. A day of loosened bonds and an undone suffering, a day of sharing one’s food with hungry people, offering shelter to those who are poor, and clothing naked ones.

In the year 2000, the new millennium, I was at a point where I couldn’t quite understand the scene in a refugee camp along the border with south Sudan. Eating just beans and maize, and that but once a day, the refugees came to worship—singing—by



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the hundreds. Many stopped outside the grass-fenced compound and pooled their clothes, dressing one person so he or she could attend worship dressed, while they waited on the fringe of worship naked.

Isaiah knows the story of exile—the story of the scattered, starving refugee, those who are wandering, bearing great suffering. And he cries to God’s followers in their personal comfort, “Heed the unmet need about you—that’s what pleases God.” Yet the cry goes on in every generation. The “fast” Isaiah describes is what a broken, recovering community needed long ago, but the words are again tragically fresh in our own day.

Matthew 6 also reveals Jesus offering from the mount a new, yet very old, word. His call is similar to Joshua’s to “choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh 24:15). We can choose the gods of exterior comfort and appearance in the land, or the Lord of inner conviction who treasures connection to others. Invest yourself in the eternal mattering taught from the mount. When Matthew speaks (v. 21) about the co-location of our heart and our treasure, we need to understand the Hebrew “heart-mind.” The Hebrew sense of heart is not about feelings but about what is rational and inclusive of the best life-thought. It includes a reordering in this new day that reflects the principles of a new kingdom worth dying and rising for. This is a kingdom that recognizes we come from and return to dust, but a kingdom that invites us to reflect the new day of an old order in the fabric of our lives and behavior.

Children’s Time [Larry Hollar]

Talk about special things people do during Lent and how some decide to fast. Do some reading beforehand about the history and meaning of fasting. Yet the goal is not to educate on fasting but to underscore Isaiah’s point: even as we reflect and act personally during Lent in a sacrificial and prayerful way, we remember those who are needy and work so that their lives are better. This is not a vacation time from those concerns; they are what the season is all about, because as we respond to people’s needs, we show who God is.

Musical Suggestions [Larry Hollar]

Again We Keep This Solemn Fast—*The New Century Hymnal* 187

Lead On Eternal Sovereign— *The New Century Hymnal* 573

Let Justice Roll Like a River—*Gather Comprehensive* 716



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Reflection from Hunger for the Word, Year C
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