



**breadfortheworld**  
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

## **February 22, 2012, Ash Wednesday**

*By Peter J. Paris*

Isaiah 58:1–12

Psalm 51:1–17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

### **Introduction**

A major purpose of the forty days of Lent is to prepare for Good Friday and Easter. The congregation should not think of those events as having taken place only in the past, but should ponder the degree to which the realities they represent are still a part of the world—violence generated by injustice, and resurrection that restores God’s purposes for life. Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent by calling the congregation to a sober and realistic examination of its faithfulness. Where the preacher and congregation discern they are violating God’s purposes for all to live together in covenantal support, the community should repent. The biblical passages for Ash Wednesday help the preacher and the congregation reflect on the faithfulness of the community, to name points for correction, and to identify ways to do so (especially through repentance). Isaiah invites the church to compare what it says in worship with the way it lives in the everyday world. Psalm 51 calls the community to repent of its offenses against God and other people. Paul urges the congregation to consider the degree to which they have imported conflicts from the larger society into the church. Making use of the ancient idea that one stores up treasures in heaven by expressing solidarity with the poor, Matthew prompts the church to consider the degree to which we are doing that very thing.

### **Isaiah 58:1–12**

In this text Second Isaiah calls upon the people to discern the difference between true and false worship. The former not only involves proper ceremonies in the house of worship but also implies doing justice in solidarity with the most vulnerable people in the community, through such things as sharing one’s resources with the hungry, the homeless, and the naked. What happens in liturgy is supposed to shape how the community lives. In other words, true worship results in ethical practices that embody God’s purposes. False worship is a self-serving enterprise that appears to seek the righteousness of God while contradicting that righteousness in the community’s own practices toward others. By doing justice, the people cooperate with God’s activity of restoring God’s damaged creation.

Isaiah uses the practice of fasting as a case in point. In Jewish tradition, fasting was to have a double purpose. The feeling of hunger caused by fasting is supposed to awaken the self to the profound need for God and to alert the self to the hunger of the neighbor. In covenantal community, becoming aware of the hunger of another should motivate community members to alleviate that hunger. In Isaiah’s day, however, people were fasting (and engaging in other rites of worship) only to garner social prestige and social power. They did not consider the ethical responsibilities to others that are inherent in the act of worship.



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Reading this text in the aftermath of the horrific 9/11 tragedy raises a number of theological and moral questions related to these themes. Prior to 9/11, many citizens of the United States were like the people of Isaiah's day: moving through life in self-satisfied, self-secure ways. Airliners commandeered by terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center in New York, plunged into the Pentagon, and might have hit a third target, had that plane not been forced to crash by the actions of the passengers themselves. This day of horror has been indelibly written into the memory of the United States. Deceived by its own sense of moral goodness, our nation could not imagine that any others in the world would act with such hatred toward us. Countless moral questions continue to puzzle our people. Two such questions are the following: (1) Is our nation willing to perceive 9/11 as a wake-up call to the fact that in the world scene we have often been self-centered and acted in many other unjust ways? It is small wonder that people in other nations are resentful. (2) Are the so-called terrorists demonic beings undeserving of humane treatment?

One of the most redeeming acts following the 9/11 attack was an event at the Riverside Church in New York City, called "A Time for Healing." This event sought to loose the bonds of injustice and to offer true worship by coming together in supportive community. It was an interfaith gathering of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and others, who drew upon the resources of their respective traditions as offerings for the healing of the city and the nation. The people at this event were united in their grief and fright, and the service, by honoring and drawing sustenance from the different worship traditions, helped them to draw closer to one another and to demonstrate the solidarity that God desires among all peoples.