

Roll Down Justice: God Has Work For Us To Do

Isaiah 58:6-12

Rev. Jenaba Waggy

March 26, 2023

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? ⁷Is 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?

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. ⁹Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰if 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. ¹¹The 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. ¹²Your 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. (NRSV)

I have a confession that would horrify my Eastern European ancestors: I am a terrible cook.

It's not that I'm bad at the mechanics of cooking, it's that I don't care. I am bored with the sautéing of vegetables and the precise temperature of baked chicken; I have other things to do than decide whether or not there needs to be garlic in this dish. (I'm informed by my Italian friend that the answer to that is always yes.) Sometimes, fasting looks like a grand idea not because I want that particular spiritual discipline but because I can't be bothered to remember to take the pork out of the freezer and buy broccoli.

Cooking with other people, though, changes the game; it's harder not to care about creating something with others. At the church I attended just after college, it was a spring tradition for a group of women to take a Saturday morning and gather to make fettuccini noodles. There is nothing quite like a flour-filled kitchen at ten in the morning as the rain batters the windows, five conversations flickering over the stretching, stretching, stretching of dough while the sharp-eyed matriarch gently corrects your rolling technique.

If you've never made noodles from scratch before, it's not a terrifically short process; it's making the dough and letting it sit, it's stretching it over and over (or, in the case of things like biang biang noodles, slapping them against the counter in a deeply satisfying way); it's realizing that there are now *so many noodles* to boil. With the women at the church, it was feeding the dough into the hand-cranked noodle machine clamped to the style of counter that is in every mid-century Protestant church kitchen, the strips of dough unravelling our into waiting fingers that we had to be careful not to ball up again and undo our work. Eating the noodles we made doused in sauce from the last of the canned tomatoes, paired with fresh-made garlic bread from the piano

teacher down the street—I never had a desire to fast from that kind of a dinner because that one was anchored in meaning, in something like family

“Is not this the fast I choose?” asks Isaiah on God’s behalf at the beginning of today’s text, and we need to go back a bit to know what fast God *doesn’t* choose. This section of Isaiah is known as Trito or Third Isaiah, likely written about five hundred years before the birth of Christ and about fifty years after the return of the people of Israel from the Babylonian exile. There had been enough time for the people to settle back into patterns, to remember what boredom in safety felt like, and to start wondering where the God of world-changing events had gone. The religious rituals of the day were perfunctory; the offering of fasts was out of pattern rather than piety. The people at the margins of society were forgotten; the metaphorical meals of the community were prepared without heart, without conviction. “Look,” says the prophet, “you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ⁵Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?”¹

Rev. Dr. Howard Wallace writes that, “The questions that follow in vv. 6-7 redefine fasting in the people’s eyes. Fasting is universally associated with self-deprivation, with withdrawal or abstention from food mostly. But these verses put a much more active and positive spin on the nature of fasting. The implication is that loosing the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, and breaking every burdensome yoke are a significant part of fasting (v. 6). Fasting is also sharing bread with the hungry, housing the homeless, covering the naked, and being available to others (v. 7). There is no doubt that some of these tasks will require of the doer a personal cost, in effort, time, money, maybe even in reputation. It will mean sharing what is possessed with those who have no possessions.”²

The worship, the ritual offered becomes a meal made in community; it becomes a practice, together, of the faith claimed. It becomes an invitation, a recognition, a reverence for God’s hope of wholeness, not to starve ourselves but to eat our full of the connection to each other. Over and over again in Scripture, God tells the world that the most beautiful thing is a community where everyone is seen, heard, and valued. “Do justice and love mercy,” says Micah; “Let justice roll down like an ever-flowing stream,” says Amos; do not offer empty acts of worship while people are starving, says Zechariah, says the psalmist, says Jeremiah; at the end of all things, taking care of others is taking care of Me, says Jesus; care for the ones among you who are cast to the margins, for they are beloved, too, says Paul. Feast on the richness of giving up that which separates us from one another, deliberately stepping into the kitchen to pull noodles together, to fight injustice together, to become the reflected light of the Holy not in a solitary candle but in a field of lanterns.

This past week, several hundred of us went to Lansing to speak with representatives about the need for legislation to curb gun violence. We gathered “as multiple bills are moving through the Michigan Legislature that address safe gun storage and universal background checks, and create so called ‘red flag laws.’... Rev. Paul Perez read a statement by Bishop David Alan

¹ NRSV, vv. 3–5

² [Year A Epiphany 5 Isaiah 58 \(unitingchurch.org.au\)](http://YearA Epiphany 5 Isaiah 58 (unitingchurch.org.au))

Bard... ‘I understand that no single set of laws will eradicate gun violence,’ said Bard. ‘I’m also convinced that simply because we cannot do everything does not mean we should do nothing.’”³

Isaiah’s words do not cover every possible version of being in community with each other in a way that honors God. The noodles the women of Faith Alliance made could not feed anyone for a lifetime. The legislation passed this week in both the House and the Senate will not stop gun violence entirely. *But this is the fast I choose*, I who follow the God who calls me by name: to speak up for safety as often as I can, anyway. To make noodles that feed a laughing gaggle of girls, anyway. To do the work of breaking yokes, anyway. This is the fast I choose: to write letters, templates for which are on our website or will be at Connections after the service; to educate myself on the ways the Church perpetrates injustice; to let the oppressed go free everywhere I find I have any part of holding them captive.

Isaiah sets up an if-then clause: if this happens, then this happens. *If you clothe the naked, then your light shall break forth. If you feed the hungry, then the Lord will answer.* This feels a little dicey to those of us who come behind Martin Luther’s adamant declaration of *sola fides*, faith alone; it is God who does the work of answer, of being the Light, of being among us. It is not that we earn it, or that we bargain with God to be God.

But the if/then clause is only in this section and is a reminder never to carve out Scripture without remembering the larger body; put in context of the tapestry of Scripture, it is not a clause but a dance learned from a Teacher Who moved across the waters in the chaos at the beginning of time. “There can be no mistaking the language in which this ‘fast’ that God chooses is cast,” writes Dennis Bratcher. “This is the language of the exodus, when Israel was the people suffering under injustice, bound under the yoke of slavery, oppressed by the lords of the land. And when they had cried out to God for relief, he had heard their cries and had entered human history to bring freedom and deliverance as an act of grace.

“But this is even more than the language of the exodus. This is also the language of the return from Babylonian exile...When they were treated unjustly and cried out, God had responded to their cries (cf. Psa 137). When they were slaves and exiles God had freed them. When they were bound under the yoke of oppression, God had loosed their bonds. When they were hungry and thirsty in the wilderness God had provided them food and drink. When they were naked God had provided them clothes that did not wear out. When they were homeless and wandering in the wilderness and exiled in Babylon God had brought them into the land. They had experienced all of these things in their history. And God had expected the Israelites to learn from all those experiences as he revealed himself through them the nature of the God whom they served. It was the nature of that God that defined who they were to be as his people.”⁴

We in a 21st century Methodist sanctuary, we on our computers and phones around the world, we are not Israelites recovering from exile, but are we not creations taught of the nature of God? Are we not humans who have been hungry and thirsty in this wilderness we wander for the 40 days of Lent? Are we not learning constantly how to give and receive grace that frees? “God has work for us to do,” says the title of this sermon, and yes, the work is that of justice—of breaking yokes, of fighting oppression, of feeding the hungry. But it is also the work of listening

³ [United Methodists hold rally at state Capitol in support of gun safety legislation \(michiganradio.org\)](https://www.michiganradio.org/news/2023/03/26/united-methodists-hold-rally-at-state-capitol-in-support-of-gun-safety-legislation/)

⁴ [Ae5 Year A, Epiphany 5, Commentary, Isa 58:1-12, OT \(crivoice.org\)](https://www.crivoice.org/2023/03/26/ae5-year-a-epiphany-5-commentary-isa-58-1-12-ot/)

to the way God is walking and learning how to walk the same; it is the work of rebuilding ancient ruins not to trap people within them but to create shelter that can become home; it is the work of gathering in flour-dusted kitchens to turn a hand crank and create noodles to feed a community, even when we hate cooking.

What a feast that work is. What a lifetime of things to do, and to decide not to do, and to learn how to do better. That is the fast I choose: to love as God has loved us, knowing that your humanity and mine are bound in the Human One Who walks with us in this Lenten season and all the others.

What fast will you choose, sibling? How will you restore the streets to live in? What does it look like for you to be a spring of water, whose waters never fail?

Shall we find out together? We can even bring some noodles for the journey.

May it be blessed. Amen.