

Sunday, February 9, 2014: Isaiah 58:1-9a

It's not quite Lent, but we can see it from here.

by [Fairfax F. Fair](#) in the [February 5, 2014](#) issue

The prophet Isaiah lays out what God wants of the creatures made in God's own image. God does not want self-deprivation. God does not want self-flagellation. God does not want us to suffer for the sake of suffering. God created us in love and wants us to live life to the fullest, knowing joy and communion and fulfillment. This means neither parading our piety nor celebrating hardships in service to a misreading of God's commands. What God wants is for us to live out the image of God in which we are made, to live in a way that reflects God's love and justice.

The church is, of course, no stranger to hypocrisy. A pastor praised a parishioner who was known for violent outbursts, vindictive acts of cruelty and coldhearted manipulations of the truth. The pastor called him a fine churchman. Never mind the man's poor treatment of those around him or the fact that he never darkened the door of the church—these things didn't matter. What mattered was that the man mailed in a large contribution once a year.

It's not quite Lent, but we can see it from here. The time is coming when black smudges will once again appear on foreheads as badges of honor that proclaim exemplary Christian discipleship—shibboleths that show a willingness to go above and beyond weekend worship and attend church on a weekday to be reminded of our mortality. What a dreary thought! No wonder many Protestants challenge the observance of Ash Wednesday as "too Catholic" or question whether holding such a service is a good use of resources. If the life of Christ is not reflected in our own lives, is our smear of ashes meaningful? Is it any different than the ancient Hebrews' fasting in body but quarreling in spirit?

Yes, God desires that we fast. But the fasting we choose is critical. Some kinds of fasting will not make one's voice heard on high. We Christians tend to choose Lent as a time to take on a spiritual discipline. But will we use the season to center our minds on the self-giving life of Christ or will we corrupt its observance? How many of

us will give up sweets for Lent, not to focus on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ but to serve as the kick-start for a new diet? Do we use the mandates of God not to direct our attention to God but to further our own interests?

What God wants from us is clear. The prophet Isaiah outlines it: “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?”

Isaiah gives us a warm-up for Lent, a blistering to get us ready for fasting days and our own long faces. Isaiah is spurred to speak by the complaints of our forefathers (the voices in this ancient litany of protest were men’s voices) about God’s perceived inattentiveness to them. Human nature has not changed in the years between Isaiah’s life and our own. When something goes awry, our first instinct is to deny that we could be at fault and instead to blame someone else, in this case God. Why won’t you listen to us, God? Why have you deserted us? Our knee-jerk reaction is to assume that someone else is culpable for our dissatisfaction.

Twelve Years a Slave is the powerful account of Solomon Northup, an African American born a freeman who is drugged and sold into slavery in the 1840s. The film, which portrays one man’s flesh as another man’s property, includes graphic violence and is difficult to watch. Troubling too is the use of scripture to condone the slave owner’s treatment of the slaves. When the owner preaches to silent and obedient slaves, he does not speak good news. Instead actor Michael Fassbender proclaims, in the name of God, “And that servant that don’t obey his lord shall be beaten with many strikes” (paraphrasing Luke 12:47).

How do we square some of our worst behavior with God’s stated desire that we loosen the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Before protesting that none among us is a slaveholder, we need to consider our treatment of people who dress differently, talk differently and fall in love differently. Consider the subservient attitude we as a society demand from those who are indentured because they want to provide for their families. Consider that we who are immigrants ourselves have no stomach for immigration reform. Consider our blindness toward the plight of the young and the scared who are wrongly arrested, have no access to competent legal advice, are threatened with long sentences before ever seeing a judge and are told to plead guilty whether they

are or not. Consider the chains we allow to bind those who work long hours in minimum-wage jobs, who live in substandard housing, eat from the boxes of cereal collected by churches and have no choice but to send their children to schools that we wouldn't even want to visit.

Isaiah's words were written long ago, but they still ring true as an indictment of humankind, especially those of us who consider ourselves pious and God-fearing. Who among us is righteous? What is the fast that God chooses? What chains are we called to break?