

**A Sermon for Ash Wednesday
March 5, 2025**



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Isaiah 58: 1-12

Isaiah is calling to us from 2500 years ago, reminding us that there are terrible inequities and suffering in our world. That much has not changed from the 500s BC. Jesus surely heard the words of Isaiah and internalized them in his own day, for Jesus' whole earthly ministry calls to us to work for peace and justice, to care for the downtrodden, to feed the hungry, to help the oppressed, to work against systems that embody oppression. In Jesus' day, that was the Roman Empire and the Temple system. I'm sure we can find some examples in our own day.

This Isaiah text has a joyous tone, not what we are expecting for Ash Wednesday. These passages were words of encouragement during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Isaiah redefines the concept of fasting – saying it is not a personal discipline, so much as a time to act for others. Isaiah says, “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...?”

During Lent, we take on disciplines that are good for us personally, that remind us that we are God's children and that we wish to behave like God's children. And so, the classical disciplines are fasting, praying, studying, and giving alms to the poor. All of these are worthy reminders that we are in a special period of the church year, a time to renew our relationship with God through these tried and true methods of discipline. However, let's pay attention to something else. Lent is the season when we concentrate on the life of the historical Jesus, in particular those events that led to his death. According to all four Gospels, Jesus continually preached that we should care for the poor and downtrodden. Other than the story of Jesus in the wilderness, there is nothing about Jesus fasting. There is no account that he took a period of time to get rid of some bad habit. And so, if we wish to follow and emulate Jesus, what Jesus actually did, we might want to add another dimension to our Lenten observance. Isaiah is calling us, just as he called Jesus, to pay attention to the disadvantaged among us. During Lent, and throughout our lives, let us work to change systems that rob the oppressed and give excess bounty to the rich, within our own nation and throughout the world. Find a way to bring comfort to the afflicted: join in our effort for the Children's Network, donate to Episcopal Relief and Development, notice the forms of injustice in our own society and work to change them.

There are quiet ways of entering Lent. Come to our Taize service this Sunday evening and join the meditative and chant-filled time of quiet prayer. Increase your private devotions – once a day light a candle, sit quietly, and pray for those in need, and for your own efforts. Pray that God be with you in what you say, think, and do in this holy season of 40 days. Experience the joy of being on the path with God and with all the rest of us. It is the pathway of quiet certitude, of knowing in our hearts that we are right with God.