



“NOT SO FAST”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 58: 1-12; MATTHEW 5: 13-20
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Isaiah 58:1-12

58:1 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

58:2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

58:3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

58:4 Look, 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.

58:5 Is 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?

58:6 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?

58:7 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?

58:8 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.

58:9a Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

58:9b If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

58:10 if 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.

58:11 The 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.

58:12 Your 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.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

Matthew 5:13-20

5:13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

5:15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

5:18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

5:19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

5:20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

This has been a pretty rough week in our country. It is deeply disheartening to witness how power is being used and abused. It is demoralizing to feel like we can't agree on anything about who we are and who we need to be as a country.

So just a few questions to gauge your level of well-being after this intense week.

Who has contemplated moving to a different country?

Who has considered never ever looking at social media again?

Who has contemplated going cold turkey on listening to or watching the news?

Who has decided that the fall of Western civilization is underway?

Not so fast. Before we all succumb to despair.

Think about it. If the way things have gone this week in the USA is shocking to us or if we feel like we just can't stay engaged because it is just too hard, we are succumbing to a faulty narrative about the past and about faith and about the future.

Imagine how emancipated people of color felt when the 40 acre land allotment recommended by William Tecumseh Sherman (better known as 40 acres and a mule), approved by President Lincoln on January 16, 1865, was repealed in the Fall of 1865 by Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, a sympathizer with Southern plantation owners.

Sherman enacted this Field Order for the re-allotment of over 400,000 acres after a meeting in January 1865 just a few days prior to the day the land re-allotment was put into motion. That meeting was with twenty black ministers, from Savannah. The people most impacted by slavery told Sherman that they needed land. It was the country's first attempt at some kind of reparation for the trauma of slavery.

And just a few short months later with a new President in office, all of the land and the self governing communities they had formed was seized by the government and given back to the families who had enslaved people, given back to the people who had declared war on the United States to protect their right to own human beings and extract wealth from their labor through a reign of terror.¹

Imagine how it felt to be a person of color in this country just weeks after the 13th amendment was passed to outlaw slavery in 1865, when Jim Crow laws began to be passed in states, cities, and counties. Imagine how it felt for generations of people of color when many of those laws stayed on the books for decades—some of them stayed on the books for over 100 years.

Imagine how indigenous communities felt when the US government violated treaties hundreds of times over. When agreements for the US government to assure the sovereignty and self-determination of indigenous communities turned into paternalistic, dehumanizing Supreme Court decisions like the 1831 Cherokee Nation v. State of GA decision that said the Cherokee had no standing in the courts.

Feeling demoralized by the actions of those with formal power is not new in this country or in this world.

The passage in Isaiah this morning calls out to those who profess to follow God to not stop speaking out about how the people were rebelling against God. The prophet tells them to shout as loud as a trumpet about the hypocrisy of the people, and of the religious people who were defying God's commands.

As people of faith, living in a world that disappoints us is part of what makes us faithful in the first place. And being able to take a hard look at ourselves is a huge part of what it means to be faithful.

People of faith who have gone before us and refused to give up have lost much more than we have and they teach us how to see ourselves as a part of a bigger, longer story than this particular historical moment. They felt the pain of their moment and they dug even deeper into the faith that defined them to stand in the strength of their faith. They didn't lose sight of a conviction they were willing to stake their lives on—a vision of a better world.

They learned to be strong and confident in their faith over the long haul by seeing their purpose as a people, not by being reduced down to individuals going through a hard time.

Faith is a communal act of resilience that must strengthen itself over and over again. Only when we come together and remember who we are in this bigger picture do we build the confidence and stamina to not just keep going, but to be faithful co-creators of a better world over the long haul.

This kind of endurance takes practice. We have to learn what it feels like to stand in God's ways and in God's call over time. We have to learn what it feels like to endure—to be stronger, longer.

In distance running we call that kind of training that teaches us that endurance and strength, threshold running. A threshold run is when you actually run a bit slower than your fastest in order to teach your body it can run harder, longer.

Your threshold pace is 25-30 seconds slower per mile than your race pace for a 3 mile race. In a threshold run, you run that pace (30 seconds slower) for 30 minutes. It's hard work, but your work does not end in exhaustion.

At that pace, your body is clearing something called lactate (what builds up when you burn carbs) at the same rate that the body is producing lactate. When there is this equilibrium your muscles don't get fatigued; they don't feel like they can't go anymore.

In a race, you are pushing past that limit.

The threshold runs teach your body that you can work hard for an extended period of time. A threshold run strengthens you physiologically and also builds up your mental toughness—it helps you gain confidence and know you can handle discomfort longer.

Going Not So Fast, builds the body's capacity for stress and for stamina and for going faster and harder when you need to.

Our threshold pace in the life of faith, means sometimes we need to slow down and remember what the Body of Christ can do—remember our stamina, remember our capacity to endure and be carriers of strength and change in a world often exhausted by a feverish and foolish push for power that rarely stands the test of time.

Faith has to be stronger than greed. Faith has to last longer than pride. Faith has to be stronger than cruelty and dishonesty and last longer than violence and injustice.

And we exercise these faith muscles not just for ourselves, but for the world.

We are salt of the earth. Salt seasons, it preserves, it purifies, it creates balance, it gives life—it is not salty just for itself. It is only salty when it reacts with something else. We are only Jesus followers in relationship to each other, to the world.

We are the light of the world. Light isn't light for itself, but so we can see something else clearly. We are not following Jesus so we can be seen more clearly, but so the world can see Jesus more clearly.

What kind of fast is pleasing to God?

The kind that bears fruit—the kind that forms a person's every day life as a life that makes the world a more just place, a more compassionate place, a more loving place.

God is not pleased, according to Isaiah, by the kind of fast that becomes rote or mindless or not impactful on the way we live.

The kind of fast that is pleasing to God bears the fruits of social righteousness—justice, mercy, compassion, joy, and true peace. When we practice our faith in a way that bears these fruits, Isaiah tells us that our bodies actually change:

The 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.

Your 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.²

This kind of fast is not about religion, it's about faith—it's about believing that the world can change. It's about believing that we can change.

This week has been a tough week—it hasn't been a good week for democracy or for Christianity or humanity in general. It can be easy to feel like retreating, disengaging, or maybe even giving up.

The worst thing we can do is to stop trying. The worst thing we can do is to stop being salty, to stop being light—or to go so fast and furious that we burn out in the end.

How many of you need to feel strengthened in your faith?

How many of you need to feel more hopeful?

How many of you need to feel more stamina? More resilience?

Today the way we come to the Table will not be the most efficient or fastest way.

This space around the Table is a sacred threshold—a place where we slow down from our race pace, from the contested, congested ways we spend our days and come together to remember the love that fuels our lives.

The ushers will direct you when it's your turn to come forward to help form a circle around the Table. We will start with the balcony and choir coming together—remembering that at the Communion Table God brings together people who are the farthest apart.

Then we will begin with the people in the back of the sanctuary for the second group to gather up front. We remember that Christ teaches us that the last shall be first.

If you need to be served in your seat, Samantha will be moving around the sanctuary to make sure all are served. And Liz will be inside the circle with the tray for anyone who needs to be served with a separate cup. We remember that Christ meets us where we are.

I invite you to stay present, to breathe, to be mindful of how you are feeling and what your body is learning. Feel the shared momentum of a community hungry for a way of life that is just and merciful and healing.

Notice this community finding our place around the Table together and feel your shared story, your shared identity as siblings in Christ. While you are seated, support your siblings in Christ with song. While you are moving, feel yourself supported by the music of your community.

Look each other in the eye—see the truth of your neighbor's God-given dignity and beauty. Take a deep breath and believe that you are seen by your neighbor with that same honor and gentleness today.

Serve each other—let the generosity of enough settle into your bones. There is enough. You are enough. This moment is enough to keep us engaged in the world that God is calling us to fiercely love.

Let Communion be not so fast. Give it the time it needs to help us to catch a glimpse of a day when all people shall together be called repairers of the breach, restorers of the streets we live in.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/the-truth-behind-40-acres-and-a-mule/>

² Isaiah 58: 11-12 NRSV