Isaiah 58:1-9a

“Life in the Fast Lane”
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Part of the series You Are God’s Chosen One

“He am I,” says God. “Here am I,” with order of the words intentional so that the emphasis is on here. As in the middle of the night when a child cries out. He’s had a bad dream. She’s just woken up startled. A parent rushes in and says, “I’m here,” with the emphasis on here.

I’d guess that, for most us here in worship, we’ve come because we believe there is a God that is here for us. Or we want to believe this. Or at least we are open to hearing about God—not just in concept but a God with a personal presence as real as the parent that comes when a child cries out. I imagine that many of us want what Isaiah is talking about with Israel: a life shared with God not only in worship on Sunday but also, especially, in the life we live through each day.

I want to share an assumption I make about all of us who come to worship. It’s an assumption I make it partly out of what I know of my own life. It’s that through most of our day, and even our week, we don’t spend lots of time consciously being about God. Our minute-to-minute thoughts just aren’t consumed with whether we are living our lives as Jesus would live them if he were us. This is not a judgment or criticism.

It’s just that our thoughts and habits can go on a kind of autopilot, so we end up living without reflections on how we’re really living and what we really desire. Which is why, I think, even when many choose not to worship regularly with a church, there are many that do. Because it’s part of how they reorient and open up to the deeper things of God and life—those things they can feel to lose through the week. Am I at all on base I thinking this?

Isaiah spoke to people in much of the same situation. Isaiah 58 shows us people coming to worship eager to hear a word about God. In fact, the sanctuary is full. They don’t want to live as though God is far-off and irrelevant but here and pertinent to life. Like us, there are ways that life and the world are unfair and want a sense that God is for them, maybe even on their side. They don’t pretend that their lives all together and know it can be freeing just to admit that. They bow their heads and practice confession as we do.

What’s more they are even practicing what we’d call spiritual disciplines. In addition to worshiping the are fasting, abstaining from food, dressing in scratchy cloth and smearing ash on their bodies. From all appearances, they are taking God very seriously. Only Isaiah says their religious practice falls short of the authentic life with God that they want. Which may account for some of their frustration: “Why have we fasted,” they say, “and [God hasn’t] seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and [God hasn’t] not noticed?”

Through Isaiah, God responds to these questions. It’s a word that’s hard to hear. Part a prophet’s job is to break tough news that people need to hear if they’re earnest about living with God.

The tough news is that people were living a kind of fast lane worship life, but it didn’t flow with the traffic of God. Their worship attendance and fasting from food suggested they wanted to honor God. But as soon as they left the service they merged into a fast lane going in a whole different direction. It was the fast lane of the crush of life—the one where you’re trying to be productive, do well for yourself, and secure your own well being.

But because we don’t always stop to consider the implications of our living and desiring, let alone if our lives and desires lines up with the God we’re convinced that we want, we can end up disregarding, endangering, and even harming those whom God loves as much as us.
Isaiah said, “On the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.”

We come to worship on Sundays expecting that God will listen to us. But the prophet was saying that, in fact, God is listening to our whole life, and much more closely than we might be prone to do. God hears that what we say we want in worship, to love the Lord our God with all that we are, and to love our neighbor as we’d want to be loved—this doesn’t line up with how we actually live during the week.

It isn’t as through we leave worship and try to displease God. It’s that our hearts are easily distracted from what God loves the most, which is always life that doesn’t just benefit me and mine, but life that seeks the well being of others.

I took driving lessons on the highways of Southern California. My first lesson, the instructor had me drive a bit on city streets, and then he pointed to a freeway onramp and said, “Get on the 805.” I was terrified. Mom and dad had never taken on the freeway. Everything moved so fast. The highway was 5 lanes wide. On my left the cars passed at a gazillion miles an hour. The instructor said, “Merge to the left.” I looked over my shoulder and merged, and looked wistfully at the slow lane where all the exits were.

My senses were heightened and I was paying attention to everything. How close I was to the car in front of me, and to the lane lines on either side. The instructor kept telling me to speed up. I felt I was going plenty fast. I was in awe of the drivers in the fast lane. They were so confident, speeding where they were going with such purpose, even darting around other fast lane cars that were slowing them down. In way, I guess I was just like them, all my attention focused on getting myself to where I was going. Even if that was just to a place where I felt safe again.

But there’s a lot you can miss when you’re just focused where you’re trying to get to in life, or on how to keep yourself safe, or just when your heart and mind are turning at 3,000 RPM. Like the life of another person that matters as much to God as you do.

God says, “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of every yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?” It’s the teacher that notices a drop in a student’s performance, and asks the kind of question that reveals that her parents are divorcing. It’s the person that looks behind an angry comment to see with compassion someone that’s shacked by fear. It’s the child of God that believes that their own safe neighborhood, good schools, and opportunities for grandkids are blessings that need to be worked for in other neighborhoods.

God continues, “Is not the fast I choose to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” Which is to say, don’t get so caught up in moving your own life forward and seeking your own advantage that you end up turning your back on those whom God also calls his children.

We notice that when God calls his children to turn toward those who are vulnerable, God doesn’t ask whether they are deserving of help, or how they got themselves into that mess, what religion they are, or what the cost of helping might be. God asks that his children not turn away from human beings in their need. God only asks this because it is God’s way with us.

Not long ago, I was talking with someone that holds two jobs in two similar kinds of workplaces. While work was basically the same, the people in the two places treated him so differently. In the one workplace he said he just felt taken for granted. He was just told what do, rarely thanked, and was never asked how he was or what was going on in his life. But at the other workplace, he felt appreciated and respected. He’d talk with people about all kinds of things. I think he was saying that the one helped him feel more fully human than the other.

The reason God calls us to worship at all isn’t because God’s a self-centered glory hog. It’s quite the opposite. God calls us to worship so we will become more fully human. In worship we learn to be like God. Which is to say, we learn to give ourselves away. In worship we release our fixation on ourselves and on our desire for life that suits us. Which is what fasting is really about—letting go, and finding a larger life than the gratification of our wants.
During communion the praise team is going to sing a song called “Here as in Heaven.” The lyrics say, “The atmosphere is changing now. For the Spirit of the Lord is here. The evidence is all around. That the Spirit of the Lord is here.”

Today Isaiah tells us that the atmosphere of worship, of a life open to God, isn’t about a moment in worship. It’s about daily life open to the commonplace heartbreaks of the world. Because that’s where the Spirit of the Lord is present, giving away God’s love even through us.

The song will say, “Spirit of God, fall fresh on us. We need your presence. Your kingdom come, your will be done, here as in heaven.” I don’t know about you, but the place I really need the presence of God isn’t in the sanctuary on Sunday. The Holy Presence is here, but only teach us he is everywhere else.

There’s a promise attached to our text. It’s that the more our lives outside of worship mirror the God we worship, the more we will be able to hear God saying, “Here am I.” Isaiah is telling us, the best way to experience God as present in daily life is to notice someone else and earnestly seek their good. Because that’s what God is doing.

Then, Isaiah says, “Your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.”

The God accomplishes the healing of our lives by refusing to close his heart to our plight. This is what the Lord’s Supper tells us week after week after week, this meal that announces God’s whole-making presence in a Savior who is broken. So when the church goes out we will hear the Lord saying, “Here am I! Here am I!” in someone that’s hungry, who feels to be wandering. The same Savior whose open heart beats in our own flesh and blood.