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## Call to Action

Feb

Glory Revealed

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, YEAR A

Last week, we explored how Micah helps us discern whether we are aligned with God's call to live with justice, mercy, and humility. This week, Isaiah calls us to action.

### REFERENCES

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112:1-10

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Matthew 5:13-20

### COLORS

Green

Take the extra verses this week. Isaiah was on a roll that day (whichever Isaiah this was). Scholars determined this chapter comes from Third Isaiah. We'll still call him Isaiah. This is a message we need today— whatever "today" you and your congregation are facing. Whatever "today" has gripped your community, your nation, your world. Too many of us say we don't need the Hebrew scriptures anymore. We've got the gospels; we've got Jesus; that's good enough. But these are the words that Jesus knew, the words Jesus lived by, that called him into the ministry he passed on to us. We need these words to give us hope, even as they bring a challenge and a burden. We need these words to stir our hearts to action. There are breaches that need repairing. There are divides that need healing. There are ruins that need to be rebuilt. There are many who have been pushed to the margins of an increasingly heartless society who need to be set free from poverty, from injustice, from all that declares them less than human. This is the fast that has been chosen for us.

This could be your shortest sermon ever, what I sometimes call a “Nike sermon.” After reading the text, the sermon is simply, “Just do it.” Just once, wouldn’t you like to preach a sermon like that? Just once? Ah, but it would probably raise more questions that would need to be unpacked. Just do what? Just do it how? Just do it where, or when, or even why? Yeah, it’s a nice sermon prep daydream, but more is needed here. Isaiah says so anyway. So, he starts with worship.

“What is worship?” the prophet asks. Specifically, he asks about fasting. But fasting is and was an act of worship. Fasting wasn’t done to lose weight or for other health purposes. It was a sacrifice to God, setting aside one’s hunger to devote full attention to the praise and worship of God. But Isaiah notes that there is a problem with the current practice of worship. Rather than it being about the one worshiped, it has become about the worshiper. Rather than the focus being on God, the focus is on the self. “Why don’t you see me? Look how humble I am.” The prophet rails, “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers.” Your Sunday behavior doesn’t spill into Monday or any other day. It’s all about you.

None of us would be so blatant, of course. None of us would sit in our sanctuaries and wave to God, saying, “Look at me.” Yet, the “what’s in it for me” attitude is rampant and often sits in the back of our minds where we aren’t even aware of it, until we begin to wonder if we’re on the right track. We start to think maybe we should try something else to get more for us, to be more fulfilled.

Isaiah has a different antidote to that empty feeling: Get out of yourself. It’s that simple. Get out of yourself. That is difficult and complicated in a culture that focuses so relentlessly on the individual. Get out of yourself. “Is such the fast that I choose?” says Isaiah to the Lord Almighty. “A day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?” (Isaiah 58:5 NRSV)

Let’s take a moment to breathe. We need to ask if Isaiah is announcing the end of humility, because it sort of sounds like it. He begins in this text with noise: “Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” (Isaiah 58:1 NRSV) That is not very humble-sounding. He is moving into alpha male territory, some might determine. There is brashness here, a shouldering one’s way into the conversation, demanding attention. Add to this the contempt about a fast that withdraws and bows the head, it does indeed sound as if Isaiah is saying that humility doesn’t work in our broken world. This is the wisdom of the current age. There are lots of theories about why this is true. From social media to adversarial politics, it all contributes to a louder and ruder public space.

So, is Isaiah anti-humility? Not in the least. But he has a biblical understanding of humility that we have sometimes lost. Humility is not the equivalent of “worm thinking.” Humility, says Pastor Rick

Warren, “is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” That was Warren’s interpretation of C.S. Lewis’s idea about humility in Lewis’s book, *Mere Christianity*. Isaiah isn’t telling us to give up on humility, but to understand that true humility is about focusing on others, particularly those society has marginalized and abused the most.

Thus, the call to action. It is for our own good as well as for the good of society. It is for living out our faith in real-world ways. Faith is not simply a set of beliefs, but a pattern of behavior. Faith is about worship. How do we worship, not just for an hour once a week, but for our whole lives, every day, every moment we are living our worship to God. And God, Isaiah says, has opinions about what worship should look like. It should look like the kingdom vision Jesus articulates. It should look like the kin-dom relationship that builds up the body, that reconciles the world (not just the parts with people like us) to God and one another. It is a call to live worship inside and outside of the sanctuaries we build. That is how we glorify God, how we reveal God’s glory to the world. Just do it.

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