

INI

St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
February 12, 2017
6th after Epiphany

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 5:13-20
Hymns: 224; 399; 412; 453:2 (244:1-3)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord
and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Isaiah 58:5-9a

Is it a fast that I have chosen,
A day for a man to afflict his soul?
Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush,
And to spread out sackcloth and ashes?
Would you call this a fast,
And an acceptable day to the LORD?
6 "Is this not the fast that I have chosen:
To loose the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the heavy burdens,
To let the oppressed go free,
And that you break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out;
When you see the naked, that you cover him,
And not hide yourself from your own flesh?
8 Then your light shall break forth like the morning,
Your healing shall spring forth speedily,
And your righteousness shall go before you;
The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Epiphany involvement

As we have proceeded through the Epiphany season this year we have considered two approaches to this season in which the glory of Christ is revealed. We have been lead to appreciate for ourselves Jesus' glory as it is revealed for us in Holy Scripture, including the blessing of this glory being revealed to the peoples of the gentile nations. In other words we celebrate God's grace in bringing *us* the gospel, even though we were not originally the people of God, but rather "the people who sat in darkness" (Matthew 4:16).

A second emphasis that has been before this Epiphany season is how the light of the glory of Christ is revealed through the Christian for the world to see. This emphasis on the Christian's calling to show forth the praises of the Lord in our lives is the focus of our text again this morning. Let us then consider the Spirit's message for us, teaching us that --

THEME: A Living Faith Radiates Christ's Glory.

Isaiah's audience was well practiced in maintaining the ceremonial traditions surrounding their worship of God. However what they demonstrated was not the benefits of maintaining faithfulness in worship tradition, but rather the futility of going through the motions of worship. The Lord's lesson is quite straightforward.

I. A Living Faith is more than Empty Ritual.

We can hear the Lord's frustration with the people in the opening verse of our text.

Isaiah 58: 5 "Is it a fast that I have chosen,
A day for a man to afflict his soul?
Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush,
And to spread out sackcloth and ashes?
Would you call this a fast,
And an acceptable day to the LORD?"

The Lord is dismissing their form of religion with good reason. He bluntly tells them that the fast they are observing is not acceptable to Him. He tells them this is not the fast that the Lord is looking for from His people. To our human reason this hardly seems fair. The Lord had laid out all the fasts, as well as feasts, and every sacrifice and every worship liturgy and form that the people were to use in worshiping the Lord. What was the problem? They appeared to be following that prescription. Why then was it unacceptable?

It was unacceptable to the Lord because their heart wasn't in it. What was left was merely going through the motions. Yes, the people of Israel observed the fasts they were required to observe to show their penitence before the Lord. Yes, they bowed before the Lord just as everyone expected them to. It all looked good to other people, but while man observes the outward appearance, the Lord looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Their hearts weren't in it, so it all meant nothing to the Lord.

Indeed the Lord makes it clear that while they were observing this fast which was to demonstrate their penitence (that is their sorrow over their sin) the rest of their lives clearly showed that they weren't repentant. They weren't making any effort to reform their sinful lives.

The lesson for us is also clear. Worship that is simply a going through the motions is **not** what the Lord is looking for. Going through the motions may be comforting in some way for some people; it may even make people appear to be spiritual, appear to be at peace, appear to be good people, but if the heart isn't right, all the right words, all the folding of one's hands, all the bowing of one's heads in outward humility means nothing to the Lord. If our worship is nothing more than faithfully following the liturgy, even if we are sincere in saying the words, if it is not accompanied by a change of heart and life, it is not repentance, even if the soul is sorrowful over one's sin.

Now, I'm am not suggesting that the Lord is telling us that coming to church is a waste of time, or that He doesn't care if we come to church or not. Neither am I suggesting that the form of worship we observe is faulty. It is more than fine, *it is edifying!* It is well

designed to bring us before the Lord, and there humble ourselves before the Lord in contrition, and then lead us to the throne of grace where we will hear the gospel of God's love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus. This is the message that the Spirit promises to use to work faith in our hearts and to build us up in that faith unto eternal life.

So then where's the problem? Well of course it is within our hearts and the weakness of our flesh. We don't want to see the sin in our lives. When we do see the sin, we don't always want to let go of that sin. We don't want to turn our backs on it and walk away from it. We say we do in church, but then, (and we all struggle with this) we leave church, and we forget about our sin, and resume the same pattern of life. From this preserve us, dear Father in heaven!

In our text Isaiah revealed the Lord's direction:

II. A Living Faith Produces Fruits Worthy of Repentance.

A living faith: that is the key. Let's review what the Lord says.

Isaiah 58: 6-7 "Is this not the fast that I have chosen:
To loose the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the heavy burdens,
To let the oppressed go free,
And that you break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out;
When you see the naked, that you cover him,
And not hide yourself from your own flesh?"

There was a great deal of oppression going on within Judah; The wealthy oppressed the poor. God had provided relief for the poor within the law of the Lord. On the seventh year people were to be released from debts, and more important, released from servitude that was brought about by debt. Lands were to be restored to the families that had lost them. These were laws that were inconvenient for the rich and powerful. While they were willing to fast for a day now and again, and observe the different feasts and sacrifices, when it came to doing business and the Lord's desire for compassion and mercy on the poor, well that was a bit of a

different story. They didn't want to give up unpaid labor! Who would even think such a thing? The Lord did not want His people enslaving their brothers. He wrote it into the law! So then the faith that was displayed on the Sabbath was revealed for its true nature the rest of the week. People suffered, and there was no mercy.

A living faith produces works that are worthy of repentance. Genuine repentance is a complete package. Yes, it begins with the realization of one's sin and sorrow over that sin. That is penitence. The next part of genuine repentance is believing in the mercies of God which are revealed for us in our Savior from sin and turning to the Lord for that forgiveness. In the Old Testament days that meant seeing the true meaning behind those sacrifices, and knowing that the Lord was sending a Savior into the world. He would serve as that sacrifice for sin who would take away sin, and guilt and condemnation. We may simply say that true repentance includes faith in our crucified Savior, Jesus Christ.

Trust in the forgiveness of God produces love and mercy and forgiveness in the heart of the recipient of God's forgiveness. It cannot be otherwise for this is the Lord's doing! This attribute of faith is revealed in acts of mercy and forgiveness. If this component of repentance and faith is missing than that faith is not a living faith. So also James wrote:

James 2:20 "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?"

And again the Apostle James wrote:

James 1:27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

While our works do not earn any credit with God, (for it could never be that He could owe us anything in any way) our works of love and mercy toward others do reveal that we comprehend the mercies of God which He has extended toward us. Faith is real for us in our hearts and then in our lives, and *then* it is real for others to see also. A living faith produces evidence of its vitality in works that yes, shun sin, but also love our neighbor.

Finally Isaiah made it clear that

III. A Living Faith Basks in Joy in the Presence of the Lord.

In the closing verses of our text Isaiah presents the difference genuine faith makes in one's heart and life.

Isaiah 58:8-9a Then your light shall break forth like the morning,
Your healing shall spring forth speedily,
And your righteousness shall go before you;
The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'

By nature we live in spiritual darkness. The gloom of sin and death reigns in the heart of man. When Jesus enters the heart light dawns and dispels that darkness. This in the glorious truth that Isaiah was promising the Jews if they would but repent and return to the Lord. It is the same truth that lights up our hearts each and every day as we live in true faith in Jesus as Redeemer and Lord of our lives. We remember how we are taught by Malachi "**The Sun of Righteousness shall arise With healing in His wings**" (Malachi 4:2). He brings healing to our sin-sick souls. We remember how Jeremiah taught us of the salvation that would come to us in Christ.

Jeremiah 23:6 "In His days Judah will be saved,
And Israel will dwell safely;
Now this *is* His name by which He will be called:
THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

So it is that Jesus goes before us as we make our way through life. He protects us from the enemy. He protects us from all harm and danger. He preserves our souls. He lifts us up and keeps us forever with the Lord. So it is that with genuine, living faith we call out to the Lord, knowing that He will hear us. We know that He cares for "**He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all**" (Romans 8:32) so we know with the confidence of faith that He will give us all things. The Lord is by your side. When you cry out, He says, "**Here I am!**" He will not fail to answer us when we call upon His name.

This is the joy of faith that fills the heart of the child of God. Yes, we endure tribulation in this life, and with tribulation comes distress, and sadness, and we struggle with the weakness of our faith as well as the weakness of our flesh. But then the Lord assures us **“I will never leave you nor forsake you”** (Hebrews 13:5).

This is the joy of faith that comforts the heart of the child of God, that peace and contentment of faith that is seen not only by fellow believers but by those of the world who know us and live around us. This is our Epiphany message, for as this glory of our Redeemer shines in our hearts filling our hearts with faith and love and hope, we also will shine with that glory of Jesus that others may see His glory in our lives. They will see the **genuineness of our faith** (1 Peter 1:7) in that we **do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of God** (Galatians 6:10). We care even as He cared for us. **“We love, because He first loved us”** (1 John 4:19). They will see, and they will know that this Jesus is real, and we will have opportunity **“to proclaim the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light”** (1 Peter 2:9).

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.