

“The Eyes Have It”

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Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9a

1 “Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.

3 ‘Why have we fasted’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it?

Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?’

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.

4 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.

5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself?

Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and lying on sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter –

When you see the naked to cloth him,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

8 Then 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.

9 Then you will call and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help and he will say: Here am I.

The Eyes Tell It

Today's sermon should be viewed at various levels, from the level of a nation, to a congregation and down to the individual. The words to you this morning are not words of admonishment or fault-finding, but of caution against potential misdirection. In order to avoid the unthinkable, every church must know what the unthinkable is and what it looks like. By knowing where and what the pitfalls are, hopefully we will not fall into one.

A certain company needed to fill a vacancy and a man from Human Resources was given the task of interviewing candidates. He wanted to see proof of sound reasoning and fundamental knowledge.

The first candidate arrived and the interviewer asked, "Please take this paper and describe to me the answer to this question, 'What is two plus two?'" The candidate had an architectural background and so he made sure the numbers lined up perfectly and were of uniform size as he wrote, '2 + 2 = 4.' He then underlined the equation and signed his name. The man from HR thanked him and told him he would be notified.

The second candidate had an artistic background and when asked the same question, he used large ornate figures which then curved around his own signature and then he folded the paper into the shape of a flying bird. The man from HR thanked him and said he would be notified.

The last candidate walked in barefooted, wearing jeans and a T-shirt that carried in bold letters across the front, "If It Feels Good, Do It!" and he slouched down in front of the desk. This guy looked like a throwback to the 70's. The interviewer asked him the same question, 'what is 2 plus 2?' The candidate got up, walked to the door, looked both ways down the hall, came back to the desk and whispered, "What do you want it to be?"

Would you agree that, in making choices, we usually gravitate toward those things that fit our wants and desires? Many manufacturing companies today incorporate changes in their new products according to what the consumer wants. In fact, this is so common and our choices are so wide when we shop, that we look for our own fit in everything we possess or hope to own. If something does not fit our most personal preferences, it goes out with the trash. And we look for avenues to find and acquire those things that fit our lifestyle. We want something that gives us our money's worth.

We do this to the point that often God gets thrown into the mix along the way. We look for a god that fits our needs. If we do not find one, we fabricate one. We make a transactional god. We say, "Hey, I did this, now you have to do that!" It occurred to me that as a child, I was taught to pray in a transactional manner. I usually prayed when I wanted something. As adults, if we have not grown along the spiritual journey, we still pray that way. And when we get no response, we conclude that God cannot handle the request; He's too small.

I know I am talking about the way we sometimes treat God today in this century. Of course, our scripture from Isaiah wasn't written in the last fifty years. But, it sounds like Isaiah is describing us. I know that fasting is not one of our spiritual endeavors, but it was a gesture of devotion back then. In the time of this scripture, it was a post-exile, post-David, post-temple time. And the people were trying to figure out how they could change their worship to please God and get back to the way things used to be. But, they failed to realize that worship styles are not what draws God closer to us. Their attempts to reinvent themselves were actually efforts to reinvent God and then draw more attention to their ideas. Having cool ideas comes with a dose of pride. And pride is inward focusing. By focusing inward, they lost sight of God. Isaiah says they were hypocritical, shallow, insincere, using all the right buzz words, and this was for just one day out of the week. Furthermore, they just could not understand where God was. Hadn't they made all the right noises? Actually, God had not gone anywhere. I cannot emphasize this enough, the people were so impressed with their ideas of worship,

deciding what would catch God's attention that they were actually drawing attention to themselves.

It reminds me of the story of Peter trying to walk to Jesus on the water. If you can recall the story, Jesus stands on the water a distance away from the boat. Peter asks that if he is really Jesus, then call out and he will walk to him. Peter is partially successful until he takes his eyes off Jesus and focuses on himself only. It is then that he starts to sink. The story is told of a pastor who leads a group of her flock to spend the night on the streets, ministering to homeless people. The weather turns bad and so they seek shelter in a nearby church where a Holy Week vigil is in progress. As they approach the door, a security guard stops them and says he is hired to keep people like them out of the church. They then realize they look just like the homeless they came to share time with. As the tired, cold, wet group is turned away, the elaborate, glittering, service of human design continues on the inside. Those on the inside are focused on the words of their prayers, the regal ceremony, the rich display, while the face of Christ stands outside, shivering in the cold.

God is not a puppet who dances when we pull the strings. If he does, I suggest you fire that god and find the real God. We should be looking for the God we need on His terms, not ours; one who made us in His image, not one created out of our selfish imagination. The only god we can create is too small. We cannot pressure God into performing. Everything we make is too small in God's perspective. That's where His grace lifts us up and gives us the chance to be grateful and focused on His majestic image.

Sometimes we see God, not as a puppet, but as someone we cannot reach. Is He a source of guilt? Does guilty conscientious equate to God? Is He an extension of our parents – something to fear? Is He an absolutely perfect and unreachable deity that only frustrates us when we try to reach out? Maybe He's just a grand old man who is old fashion and out of date. My oldest son, when he was about 13 years old said, "I hope I don't find out that God is some old man with a long beard and a clipboard." The list of how we might envision God could go on and on,

but each such vision of God is not of His making, but ours; a god who is the way we want it to be.

In this whole continuum of thoughts, the one unchanging constant is God's love. It does not waver up and down in response to our worship intensity. I once had a friend in Maryland who died of leukemia. His wife, who had the wrong concept of God's responsiveness, said he died because we had not prayed hard enough. Our spiritual practices such as prayer, bible study, singing hymns, etc are not there to make God love us, but to open our hearts to hear God more clearly. What did our scripture from Isaiah tell us to do? "...to loose the chains of injustice, to set the oppressed free, to share your food, clothe the naked, provide shelter." These are not part of a worship service, but the worship service should encourage us to do these things outside of the walls of the church.

So, I ask you this: Outside the walls of any church, in a secular environment, could you pick out the Christians in a crowd, or do they just blend in with the rest?

I once stood in the Dallas airport waiting for my flight to be announced. When the announcement finally came, the ticket agent called for First class, Gold Card members and some other special category. I mumbled under my breath, "Well, I guess this is how it feels to be a second class citizen." The woman standing next to me heard what I said and exclaimed in a bold voice, "Well, I'm not second class in God's eyes!" Everyone turned and looked in our direction.

Make no mistake, I am not telling anyone to start shouting gospel and prophesy in airports and street corners. It would probably drive away more people that attract them. But, I must say, she had no hesitation about proclaiming the Glory of God. That was one Christian you could pick out of a crowd. Perhaps if we had 1/10 of her fire and vigor, that would be enough. But, we usually do not. Too often, we make a God we will not be ashamed of. A God-in-the-box, so to speak. A God we can control. A God who responds when we say jump, just like the people Isaiah is talking about.

On second thought, maybe the woman in the airport knew what Isaiah had said, "Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet."

No doubt she did. One thing I like about the prophet Isaiah, like this woman, he tells it like it is and pulls no punches.

When today's service is over, I hope no one goes home thinking I am finding fault with this congregation. I'm not. But, you know your heart. If anything said here today strikes close to home, you can fix it. We all can use improvement. The solution is a continual process and I would like to be so bold as to pass on two suggestions that were made to me years ago. These could carry you quite a long ways.

First, pray more. My former pastor told me that he considered prayer to be our attempt to enter into a heavenly conversation that is already ongoing within the trinity. It took me a while before I began to understand what he meant. We need to get in step with God. It is amazing what happens when you do. You will not be looking for God as though He were hidden somewhere. Engaging the scripture prayerfully, we experience the living Word and the voice of Jesus.

Second, love the people around you, not just a few select individuals. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he lists positive attributes like eloquence, preaching, faith, charity, and martyrdom. But, even with these, Paul says we are spiritually bankrupt if we do not have love. Ask yourself, "Are there individuals in my church whom I see every Sunday, but have never spoken to?"

So, our goal should be to strengthen our core of commitment to follow Christ in every aspect of our lives. We need to be conscientious disciples. When we learn and then practice what we have learned, a thing called transformation takes place. You will not be reinventing yourself to attract God's attention. You will not be creating a god too small.

I do not stand here as a living example of the perfect Christian. As a child, have you ever asked a foolish question of an adult or said something completely outrageous? I have and there's nothing more telling than to see my dad or some other adult simply ignore my words or change the subject. It's like having them in your grasp and then feel them slipping away. As many of you know, I recently completed an accomplishment I set out to do about three years ago. I did it to enable me to glorify God more and to serve my congregation. But sometimes, I feel myself focusing inward and thinking, "Wow, look what I did!" At that moment, for a split second, I feel my view of God slipping away, just like my dad. At those times I see in myself as the very people Isaiah was talking about. Being humble and keeping your eye on the prize is not something we engage without a conscious process of thought. It requires effort; constant effort. I ask you to join me in that effort to keep the perspective and remember that God is God and we are not. Let us be true disciples.

Amen