

"For faith to be faith, really...."  
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### Isaiah 58:1-9a

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

### Matthew 5:13-20

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

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 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. 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. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Theologian Karl Barth is-said-to-have-said that good preachers should preach with a Bible in the new hand and a newspaper in the other. It was a shorthand way of saying that if faith is real, living, faith, it will necessarily interest with all components of our lives. Our lectionary readings for today could have been the inspiration for Barth's words.

In Isaiah, the people are lost.<sup>1</sup> Back from exile, they are overwhelmed by the tasks before them. They aren't sure what to do next. And so they do what faithful people do. They fast. They pray. Only life seems no clearer. God seems no closer.

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis on Workingpreacher.org [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3156](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3156)  
 Chris Haslam *Comments on Revised Common Lectionary Commentary*, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - February 5, 2017  
<http://www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/apr05m.shtml>



In the Beckley paper today, on the front page, there are stories about medical marijuana. Education-portable classrooms in areas of West Virginia that flooded. Water quality and environmental regulations. **Suffering. Education. Creation.**

In the New York Times. Many articles about borders and visas and greencards. **Terrorism. Art. Environmental regulations.**

Refugees, how we treat the stranger, the one in need?  
 Enemies. How do we respond to those who want to hurt us?  
 What is the role of beauty?  
 And creation. How are we stewards of creation?

These are issues of faith. That we need to talk about, as people of faith. Wrestle with. How do we balance our own fears with the command of God to fear not?

But we can't leave it at that. The Bible isn't just Isaiah. We can't just see the big picture, Matthew reminds us that it's about people, too. Not candidates. Not politicians. Not parties. But people. Salt. Light. Individuals being who they were called to be.

Living into the gospel is hearing the stories of people, and seeing the threads of good news woven through them. What's behind these headlines? Real people. Real stories. Like you. Like me.

Like these words from the Reverend Susan Olson who wrote this about bringing her daughter home from Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup>

Seven and a half years ago, after a long, long flight, I arrived into the United States with my then 2 year old daughter. She'd been great for most of the flight but for the final hour she was done. We stopped at the bathroom to change her into her "coming home outfit," and got into the lines at immigration.... We got into a line that I cannot recall the name of--mixed citizenship or something like that, because I was a citizen, and Selam was not....Selam and I were detained by immigration. We were sent to a small ugly room. I was not allowed to take my carry-on with me (it had my computer). I was not allowed to pick up my checked baggage. I was not allowed to call... [anyone]. The room was small and smelled like sweat and vomit. Everyone inside was miserable. There was a soup of languages. I understood none of them. But everyone cries in the same language.

The guards with their guns and the agents with their file folders were stern, unyielding. Everyone was hungry. Selam began to cry louder and louder and louder. I asked a woman agent if I could go back and get a snack from my carry on, but she wouldn't let me..... I was trapped in there for maybe 30 minutes, maybe only 20, I don't remember.. The whole time, I KNEW I was an American citizen with rights. I KNEW that all Selam's papers were in perfect order. I KNEW that if I needed it, my family and my friends would have moved heaven and earth to get my child in the country. But I was probably the only person in that room who knew that everything was going to be okay. And I was still scared.

When I was finally released... We gathered my bags, and our life moved on from there. I try not to remember that room full of despair. It physically hurts to think about it. But I'm thinking about it



<sup>3</sup> Susan Olson on Facebook, January 29, 2017

tonight, and remembering how very guilty I felt to leave that place with my blue passport and my carry-on bag. I am praying, tonight, for those who thought they were finally safe and who are no longer. I hope they have snacks and water.... Most of all, I hope they get to walk out that door to family and friends and freedom. I hope this country can be a place that welcomes the refugee again. I'm praying for all of the people caught in that awful, awful room.

Stories like the one from theologian, Diana Bass, about something that happened to her this week:<sup>4</sup>

I was talking to the cashier about politics...-- and mentioned my sermon yesterday about the Beatitudes. In the conversation, I started to quote them: Blessed are the poor, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers.

With each one, her eyes widened and her smile broadened. She kept nodding her head in agreement. Then, I said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

The man in line behind me blurted out, "It says that in the Bible? Jesus really said that?" I looked at him, his eyes were soft, with a longing sort of look.

I said, "Yes. Jesus really said that."

And he repeated: "Blessed are those who mourn.' That's beautiful. Thank you."

The cashier said, "Yes. Thank you."

Thus three strangers made church, found hope, and heard the Word of God.

**The gospel is this. Global.** Political in its concern for all people.

**The gospel is this. Personal.** The real stories of real people.

**The gospel is this. Communal. Us.** Who are bravely willing to talk, and then act, about the things that matter, because the gospel matters. Because Jesus lived to proclaim that God's love is for all people.

About how hungers can be fed.

Strangers welcomed.

Enemies loved.

Sins forgiven.

Joys celebrated.

Griefs comforted.

If all of this sounds a little unrealistic. It should.

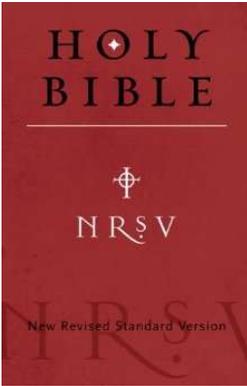
Remember those often-quoted words from Annie Dillard:<sup>5</sup>

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea who sort of power we so blithely invoke? .....The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.



<sup>4</sup> Diana Butler Bass on Facebook January 30, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Dillard, Annie. *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row, 1988. Pages 52-53.



Karl Barth did say that we should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in another. But that's not all he said. He continued to tell all of us "take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible."<sup>6</sup>

It's not an interchangeable order, and it's just one reason why God declared the Sabbath holy, One of the reasons why we start each week together, in worship. To begin where all things begin. With God, and let our lives flow from there.

NPR reported this week a story about new research that reported that eating the same food increases people's trust and cooperation. The Rev. Mary Ann McKibben Dana retitled it "Science affirms stuff the church has affirmed for millennia."<sup>7</sup>

And so it is. We are able to do all of this. All that is proclaimed in Isaiah and Matthew because we being at this table. Hearing, repeating the words Jesus spoke to his disciples, and then living into them. Remembering with our very lives a gospel that IS **very** alive. In us. Here.

Salty, radiant, and relevant.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>6</sup> Time magazine article published on Friday, May 31, 1963,  
<http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,896838,00.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/02/512998465/why-eating-the-same-food-increases-peoples-trust-and-cooperation>