

**Psalm 51:1-17**

<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. <sup>4</sup> Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. <sup>5</sup> Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. <sup>6</sup> You desire truth in the inward being therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. <sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit.

<sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. <sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. <sup>16</sup> For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. <sup>17</sup> The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

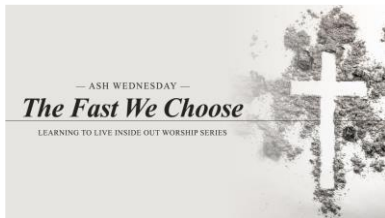
## Isaiah 58

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> “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. <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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? <sup>6</sup> 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? <sup>7</sup> 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?

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, <sup>10</sup> if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. <sup>11</sup> The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

<sup>12</sup> *Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.* <sup>13</sup> *If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;* <sup>14</sup> *then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*



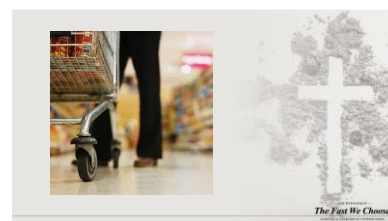
Tonight, we begin our journey of Lent, and we focus on the fast we choose. Fasting is a very personal, often individual discipline. We begin a new worship series tonight as well.

The title and main theme of the series are “Learning to Live Inside-Out.” During this season of Lent, I am inviting you to see fasting in perhaps a different way. Normally during Lent, we give something up for Lent. This year I am inviting you to turn fasting around, to make it an act of charity, to make it an outward act. This invitation encourages us to lean into the connections between our life of faith and our impact on the world around us. As we prepare to do so, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Ash Wednesday, by its nature, is an inside-out act of worship. We gather to confess our sins and to be reminded of our mortality. This is an inward act. We also receive ashes upon our forehead or hand, a visible sign of our commitment to our faith. This is an outward act. The cross of ashes is a symbol of community and connection. It represents our common pledge to live outwardly the beliefs that we hold inwardly.

Now, faithful living in the world is not always easy. We can be tempted to keep our faith inside, where it feels safer. We can be tempted to keep our faith for ourselves alone. So tonight, we begin with Isaiah's call to move beyond ourselves, beyond our natural inward focus. Hearing this call is the first step to learning to live inside-out.

As we turn to Isaiah 58, we enter into a time of examination. As we work through this passage, let us look into the state of our souls as a means to understand and grow our relationships with God, with one another, and with the world. When we take the time and make the effort to look inward, we often discover that something is not right or that something is broken. Other times we see that we are struggling with something or that we have been neglecting our relationship with God. We all know what it is like to feel each of these things. Something is out of place or just doesn't feel right. Life feels like that wobbly shopping cart at the store with the broken wheel. We limp along out of sorts. If someone asks what's wrong, we usually cannot come up with an answer. Put another way, more than something being wrong, we sense that not everything is right.



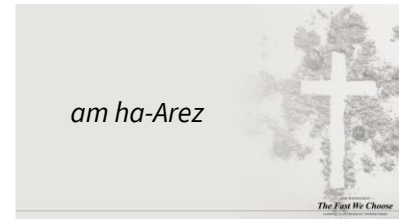
Or... maybe you or I do know. Maybe we spoke a word that we wish we could unspeak. Maybe there was an effort we should have made that we did not. Maybe there was a response or reaction that we should have held in, but did not or could not. Maybe there was a call we should have made or an event that we should have attended or at least acknowledged. Maybe this "thing" has left you with a heaviness upon your heart.

As we turn to Isaiah 58, we see that the first half of the passage falls somewhere in between these two scenarios. God begins by telling Isaiah to “*announce to my people their rebellion.*” The people are trying to seek God; they want to delight in God’s ways. They seem “*as if they were a nation that practices righteousness.*” They are doing what they are supposed to do. Sort of. The Israelites ask, “*Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves but you do not notice?*” They think that they are being righteous. But their cart is a little wobbly.

God sets the record straight. In the next two verses we read, “*Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 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.*” Their fast was not drawing them closer to God. Their fast was not changing their relationship with God or with one another. In our day God would say, ‘They came to worship on Sunday morning and then they returned to their worldly living on Sunday afternoon.’ Like the Israelites we cannot focus on “getting right with God” one moment and then ignore how we live in community or in the world the next.

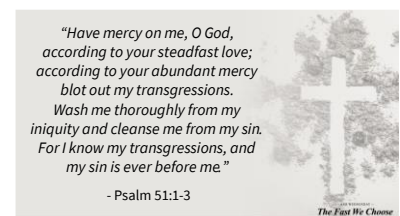
This is what God addresses as we continue on to verses 6 and 7. Putting on sackcloth, lying in ashes – these were the motions of a fast. But God wants more: “*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 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?*” These behaviors reflect a heart that is connected to God’s heart, that is focused on being a servant to others.

In Isaiah's day there was a struggle in caring for those in need and to provide justice for everyone. Those with the power and ability to do so were so self-centered that they could not see beyond themselves. This problem would persist. And continue to persist. In our Luke study, Adam Hamilton writes of the *"am ha-Arez"* – the people of the land. There were the poor, the powerless, the ones who struggled with physical and/or mental illness. This was a condescending and derogatory term. Today we might call them "country bumpkins." The *am ha-Arez* were shunned by the religious leaders. Those with the ability to help this segment of the population followed the religious leaders' example.



Mary would have been considered *am ha-Arez* by most folks. She was, as Hamilton writes, "a servant girl from a no-account town." Yet God chose her. In the gospels we see again and again that this is the people that Jesus chooses again and again. The *am ha-Arez* were the focus of Jesus' ministry. We are called to minister to minister as Jesus ministered – to the looked down upon, to the outsiders, to the outcasts.

Yet God's care for the outsider, the outcast, the outlaws did not limit God's love for the powerful. As we turn to Psalm 51, we see God's love for David, the king. In this passage we feel David's need for God and we see the importance of a personal relationship with the Lord. Here David begins by pouring out his heart to God. In the opening verses we read, *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."*



*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*” There is a humility in these words. After Nathan confronted him, David knew full well what he had done wrong. These words poured out of David after he realized the depth of his sin with Bathsheba. We too come to these points, when we recognize that we have fallen short, when we have harmed our relationships, when we have sinned against the Lord and against one another. If we are honest, when we find ourselves at this point, we too could pray this prayer, right?

Fortunately, God did not leave David there, stuck in his sin. David goes on to ask God to teach him the wisdom of God, to plant that in his heart. He asks God to purge him with hyssop, to make him clean again. David asks God to *“blot out my iniquities.”* Because of his penitence, God will restore David completely. God will wipe away this sin from David’s life and will teach David to walk in God’s ways. God longed to do this for David and God longs to do this for you and for me. God longs to answer this kind of prayer.

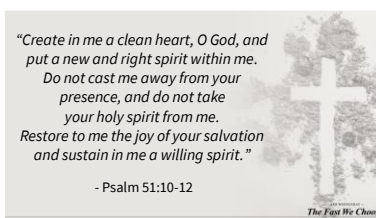
This leads us to ask: when we’re ready to offer this prayer, where do we go for restoration of joy, for redemption from our sins? Where do we go to be made new again, to have a new heart within us? We do as David did, we go to God. In Isaiah we see how God wants us to come: we come humbly and sincerely before the Lord, we bow in worship and in praise and in adoration. We offer God our thanksgiving. We come and we glorify God.



In that spirit, with that heart, God reconciles us to the divine presence. This was not what was happening in Isaiah 58. We cannot just go through the motions when we seek to draw near to God to find cleansing and renewal. Instead, we must come with an open heart, with a hunger for God to reach out, to touch our hearts and our lives. For the people of Isaiah's day, their fast was not feeding a hunger. It was going through the motions. They were far too busy making money and taking advantage of their workers to put much effort into their relationship with God.

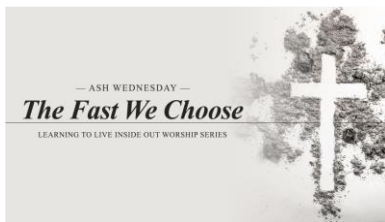
We too can be so filled with the busyness of life that we can forget how hungry we really are. We can think we are self-sufficient and can handle it all. We just fill the cart with more and more stuff. Sometimes it is so full that the wobbly becomes really noticeable. In that moment we realize that we are needy, that we feel empty. We realize that we hunger for acceptance and for unconditional love. We hunger for meaning and purpose, for direction. Yet our unspoken fear can be that maybe God won't give us what we need, that somehow we are unworthy.

Returning to Psalm 51, David cries out to God. He identifies his need. Reading from verses 10-12 we hear his cry: *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit."* David cries out trusting that God will do this for him. David leans fully into the goodness and mercy of God.





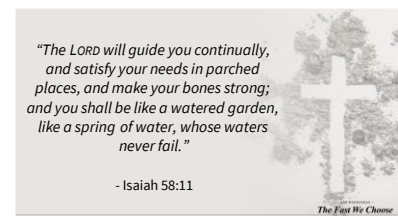
This is the message of the cross as well. At the end of this season that we begin tonight, we will once again arrive at the cross. There, we see love poured out. There Jesus will declare that all are worthy of grace and forgiveness – from the thief hanging next to him, to the soldiers who placed him on the cross, from the religious leaders that felt threatened, to you and to me. There the power of sin will be broken, and from the grave the power of death will be defeated. From the cross and then from the grave, the light of the world will shine out into the darkness.



Through the prophet Isaiah, God called the people to a fast that led them to be people who cared for the least, that stood for the oppressed, that loosened the bonds. A fast or

time set aside for God must change our hearts – and not just in the moment. When we come as God desires for us to come – humbly, sincerely, honestly – then something happens. We are transformed, we are healed, we are made clean. We are made right with God. This allows us to then be made right with one another, empowering us to then serve one another.

At times we will help one another loosen the chains that bind. At times we will help each other untie the cords of the yoke. This is why we gather as the community of faith. This is why we go out to serve others in our communities. When we do, *“our light will break forth like the dawn.”* And when we do, hear the promise from Isaiah 58:11 – *“The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered*

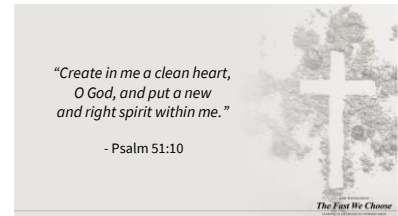


*garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.*” Doesn’t this sound awesome? It is available. It is available to you and to me. It is available without price when we come to God humbly, sincerely, and honestly.

The heart of David’s prayer to God was this key verse:

*“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”* May this be our prayer tonight. As we

begin this journey of Lent, may we hunger for God to create in each of us a clean heart. May we be willing to receive from God a new and right spirit within us. As we receive these ashes tonight, may we begin a journey that draws us closer and closer to the heart of God, our light in the darkness, our hope in the valley, our joy in all of life. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.



### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider a fast for Lent, what might you give up OR what might you add in that would be encouraging to you in this special season?
- 2) *Pray*. What in you are you willing to surrender as we begin this Lenten journey? How might you pray daily for strength in this endeavor?
- 3) *Study*. Re-read Isaiah 58:6-7. Where and in whose life might you be able to apply some of these actions?