

The two lectionary passages that I have decided to tackle today pack a powerful punch. These are not passages that allow us to comfortably sit in this sanctuary and pat ourselves on the back for our excellent music, meaningful liturgy and well done worship. As American author Annie Dillard writes, "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of [their] conditions." She wonders out loud if we really understand the God we claim to worship.

It seems to me that the words we heard from the prophet Isaiah and Apostle Paul mirror Dillard's sentiments, for the Israelites and the Corinthian believers were not sufficiently sensible of the conditions of the God they claimed to worship either! It appears the Israelites were only going through the motions of religious rituals and the Corinthians were bickering over who was best at being a follower of Christ. It's apparent neither Isaiah nor Apostle Paul was writing complementary words of encouragement to the people of God, instead they were calling them to account.

Dillard's quote continues with a great question for us today because she asks, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke?"

Do we have the foggiest idea what sort of power we invoke today as we gather to worship? Do we grasp the real power of God and what that power might look in and through us as a church? Remember, we are gathering to worship the God who created not only our earthly home and each one of us, but the universe as well, which scientists conclude is still expanding. God is still creating!

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke today? "Or," as Dillard continues by saying, "As I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?" She punches us in the gut with this question, "Does anyone believe a word of it?" Her gut punch is just like these texts from Isaiah and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians today.

Listen to Eugene Peterson's translation of Isaiah 58: "Shout out, Isaiah, and don't hold back... They're busy, busy, busy at worship and they love studying all about me. To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people, law-abiding, God-honoring and love having me on their side. But, they also complain about God saying, 'Why do we fast and you don't look our way? Why do we humble ourselves and you don't even notice?'"

The Israelites are busy, busy, busy doing all the right things. As a matter of fact, it is hard to find a seat in the Temple come worship time. The Temple is packed; the music is top notch and the people are worshipping and fasting day in and day out.

Yet, Dillard apply describes what's happening in the temple as well as in many churches today, "The churches are children playing on the floor with the chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning." Dillard packs a mean punch with good intention. We in the church manage to kill a Sunday morning, for worship often becomes root or just for show, for those leading as well as those participating. Worship also becomes more about showing up, than anything else. Worship is about putting in the hour or so and checking off the box - commitment to God - satisfied. Worship is about nothing more than learning ABOUT God, while not expecting the power of God to actually show up.

But like Dillard, Isaiah unleashes a response as to why their busy, busy, busy worship and in depth studying ABOUT God doesn't draw God's attention or even cause God to give them credit for all their hard work. Isaiah indicts their worship saying, "The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit. You drive your

employees much too hard. You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight. You fast, but you swing a mean fist. The kind of fasting you do won't get your prayers off the ground. Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after: a day to show off humility? To put on a pious long face and parade around solemnly in black? Do you call *that* fasting, a fast day that I, GOD, would like? [Pause]

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?" Like Dillard, Isaiah is questioning the people of God...it seems they don't believe a word of it. And I believe Annie Dillard's haunting words challenge us in the exact same way today.

Image her haunting words being a single stone dropped into a still body of water, where the ripple effect is ever expanding. "Do we believe that showing up for worship and invoking the power of God has a ripple effect in our lives? That showing up and worshipping has ramifications for our lives and for the life of this church? Do we believe in the power of the Spirit at work within us that is able to do abundantly far more that we can ask or imagine?"

Dillard is done with us yet, as she continues by reminding us of the real power of God among us, for

she writes, "It's madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

I love the image she has created for us, as the power of God is something that should cause all of us to tremble with awe and anticipation each and every Sunday, as we gather for worship. The power of God right here and right now in the midst of worship makes it clear that falling asleep is not an option according to Dillard. Instead we should be holding on to the pews, to each other for dear life!

Believing we can just have a nice worship service about God with no ramifications on the way we live beyond this hour of worship is not an option shouts Dillard, Isaiah and Apostle Paul to the people of God.

Yet, if you were still wondering why Dillard believes we should be acutely aware of the power we so blithely invoke as we gather for worship each Sunday, then digest her conclusion: "For the sleeping god, may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

Dillard's "sleeping god" awoke according to Isaiah for God took offense. Their worship rituals, their fasting and even their pious acts of humility were

rejected by God. God saw that their worship had no impact on how they lived their lives beyond their time of worship. They knew ABOUT God and studied ABOUT God, but there was zero translation into their daily lives, zero fruit produced by the people for those they employed or interacted with on a daily basis, for those who were oppressed or unjustly treated in their culture, and for those who were hungry, naked or forgotten in their communities.

It's madness, my friends, to gather weekly to worship the Sovereign God of all creation without the expectation that our worship will translate into concrete actions outside these walls and times of worship.

That is why Apostle Paul's letter to the believers in Corinth continually points to Christ Jesus, the crucified one, the self-emptying one, the one who laid down his own life to reconcile humanity to God.

Apostle Paul didn't come to the Corinthians with a clenched fist of power to force the quarreling church to stop their misguided efforts. He didn't come claiming power that he certainly had, given his experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. No, Paul, came with humility and pointed not to himself or to his personal conversion or to his

phenomenal track record of starting churches, but to Christ. Paul emptied himself and pointed solely to Christ Jesus. [Pause]

Friends, "It's madness to just dress nicely and act nicely at church; for we should all be wearing crash helmets and our ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares, as 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."

This third week of my pastorate among you, I pray, pray, pray that God is not taking offense with our worship. But, even more so... even more so, I pray, pray, pray that God will continue to draw us out to where we can never return."

May we never leave worship thinking, "Well, that was a nice service," and promptly forget that our real worship of God begins, as we walk out the doors of this sanctuary and enter into the communities that God has placed us. Our worship, if God is not to take offense, must bear fruit, must have an impact on the way we move and have our being in this world, outside of our time of worship, as individuals and as a church. [Pause]

I want to share a story with you that literally took my breath away when I first read it. Andrew Connors

shared this story in a commentary on Isaiah 58, as he reflected on how the people of God move and have their being in this world. Listen deeply...

One year during Holy Week, a few Christians from a well-endowed congregation in a major metropolitan area spent the night on the street with those who were without homes. The night was chilly and rain rolled in close to midnight. Looking for shelter, the handful of travelers felt fortunate to come upon a church holding an all-night prayer vigil. The leader of the group was a pastor of one of the most respected churches in the city. As she stepped through the outer doors of the church, a security guard stopped her. She explained that she and the rest of their group were Christians. They had no place to stay and were wet and miserable, and would like to rest and pray. Enticed by the lighted warmth of the sanctuary, she had forgotten that her wet, matted hair and disheveled clothing left her looking like just another person without a home from the streets. The security guard was friendly, but explained with brutal honesty, "I was hired to keep homeless people like you out."

My breath was taken away and my heart sank, because I know that this happens more often than we would care to admit. If we are honest with ourselves, in

some ways we have all been like the security guard, barring people from the extravagant love of God by our actions. We have all turned away someone, whether intentionally or unintentionally, from the grace that is freely offered by our words or deeds.

Yet, here is the good news: God never gives up on us. God didn't give up that church that hired the security guard to keep people out. God will not give up on us either.

Through Isaiah and Apostle Paul God is yet again drawing us out to where we can never return. You see, we are not merely to be informed by God's word. We are to be **transformed** by God's word. As people who claim to follow Christ, the way in which we move and live and have our being in this world is to be radically different. The Alternative Way of Christ Crucified is radically different than the ways of our culture, which glorifies self and power, wealth and security, youth and superficial beauty.

Christ crucified is radically different for Christ emptied himself. Like Christ, we are to empty ourselves and use the incredible gifts that God has given us, not for our own pleasure or gain, but for others.

"This is the kind of fast day I'm after, says God through the prophet Isaiah: to break the chains of

injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families."

As we discern the way God is calling us to respond to the community in which we find ourselves, let us remember that God will call us "out to where we can never return."

I imagine the rain soaked pastor and church members who sought the warmth of that sanctuary one cold and rainy cold night, were called out to a where they could never return. May it be so for us as we seek to faithfully live as a church into the alternate way of Christ crucified. Amen.