

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 8, 2026
Isaiah 58:1–12

What is the fast we choose?

I spent an afternoon working in the food pantry, assisting clients as they shopped for groceries. An older man, clearly past retirement age, came in for the first time and provided his information for our database. Over the course of our conversation, I learned that he juggled three jobs to support his family, including overnight warehouse work near the airport that required lifting heavy boxes.

Despite his extraordinary work ethic and commitment to providing for his loved ones, something felt fundamentally wrong about a man his age standing before me, exhausted, needing our pantry's assistance to feed his family.

The prophet Isaiah minces no words in Isaiah 58:1–12. God's judgment toward Judah (and God's people more broadly) is unsparing: "Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins." Injustice is rampant, and God will not tolerate it. The passage focuses especially on religious hypocrisy. Public displays of piety, such as fasting and prayer, are abundant, yet the very same people who practice them are perpetrating harm against society's most vulnerable people.

Isaiah 58 is categorized as part of "Trito-Isaiah," or "Third Isaiah." In terms of authorship, scholars suggest that these chapters were written by a collective of authors who sought to speak with the spirit of the original prophet. It is also highly likely that they were written well after the return from the Babylonian Exile and, as such, were meant to interpret the causes and effects of that calamitous experience.

Very clearly, the author(s) of Isaiah 58 viewed the injustices and hypocrisies of the people as one of – if not the – most important causes of

Judah's exile, believing that God's judgment for such unfaithful living could be the only explanation for such a tragedy.

But there is also a remedy.

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps 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?" (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Forming faith in ourselves and others is of mighty importance to God. But what we read in Isaiah is a stalwart call to never forget that a life of faith is always marked by faithful living — especially toward those on the margins. The oppressed, the hungry, the homeless poor, and the naked are all named specifically. We also do well to fill in the gaps with virtually anyone else who experiences suffering.

And if we do, as we read in verses 9b–12, the reward is extraordinary.

Caring for the vulnerable is not peripheral to faith. It is the outward sign of the inward claim of faith. It is light to the world, and it is salt for the earth. It is the way we see Christ's body still alive around us. It is indeed like a well-watered garden (Isaiah 58:11).

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So what is the fast we choose? We, individually? We, as congregations? We, as a nation and a political body? What are the acts of faith we are willing to engage in to do this holy work?

Since its beginning, the church has been at its best when it takes the task of caring for the vulnerable seriously — especially when it is willing to rock the metaphorical boat. Perhaps that looks like deepening a mission partnership that already exists. Perhaps it is public witness to our city,

state, or federal government. Perhaps it is creating caregiving spaces for those in need.

The text tells us that God calls us to such work. It also affirms our inclination to shy away. And it offers us hope, reminding us that even when the work feels daunting, God goes with us along the way.

Questions for reflection on Isaiah 58:1–12

1. Isaiah suggests that inauthentic and hypocritical faith is always around us. Do you sense that to be true? Have you experienced it yourself or seen it elsewhere?
2. What sort of “fast” do you feel called to? What ministries of justice and charity feel meaningful to you, your congregation, or your community?
3. What are the signs in our communities of faithful and just living? What would it look like to see breaches repaired and streets restored?