

Rev. Lisa Schrott

November 2, 2025

James 1: 21-22 & Isaiah 58:5-10

We Belong to God: Service to a World That Needs God

Our second scripture reading is from the prophet Isaiah. The 66 chapters of the book of Isaiah are divided by scholars into three sections: First Isaiah, chapters 1-33, which speak to the coming judgement of Judah and its capital Jerusalem, as well as other nations, because of their failure to follow the ways of the Lord. This section ends with the Hebrew people exiled to Babylon. Second Isaiah is sometimes referred to as "the Book of Consolation" was written to the people in exile. It begins with the beautiful words in chapter 40: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid..." Third Isaiah begins in chapter 56 with words to the people returning from exile. It tells of promise of restoration and renewal for the people. Our words this morning from speak to how the people are to worship and serve God. Hear now these words from Isaiah 58:5-10:

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?

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?

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.

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,
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.

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Service to a world that needs God. The Church exists to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ through service to a world that needs God. As I sat with and prayed about this piece of our mission statement this week, as well as our two scriptures, I kept coming back to our world, a world that needs God. It is hard not to look

around our world right now and despair. Whether it is damage to creation through climate change and natural disasters; the significant economic challenges we are facing with diminishing access to necessary housing, food and medical care for too many people; the legitimate concerns about the direction our nation is taking away from bedrock constitutional principles of due process and separation of powers. And I know in each of our individual lives and lives of our families there are pressing concerns – health issues, job issues, relationship issues. So much weighing on us and depleting us. We live in a world that needs God. We live in a world where each of us needs God.

We live in a world that needs the cosmic God who creates order out of chaos and who brings morning light after a night of darkness. We live in a world that needs the God of whispered prayers of “help me, see me” in the middle of deep pain and the God to whom we give thanks when we have moments of overwhelming joy and peace. We are not the first people to live in a world that needs God. We will not be the last. And we live in a world where we are called to serve. And to serve with the indwelling of God.

As I share scripture, I often highlight the context in which the passage was written. I think this helps us understand how both the big picture and the details written so long ago apply to our world today. The New Testament scripture passage that Jennifer read this morning is from the Epistle of James. Traditionally this letter has been attributed to James, the brother of Jesus. James was a leader of the church in Jerusalem. However, the consensus among scholars is that the writing was attributed to James by those who admired him as “the Christian authority most loyal to Judaism,” as noted by New Testament scholar Raymond Brown.¹ The opening of the letter states that it is written to followers of Christ outside of Palestine, specifically to those who see themselves following in the lineage of the Hebrew faith.

James wrote this letter to encourage the followers of Jesus not to sidestep their ethical obligations to neighbors. Demonstrate your faith by going beyond words and getting some skin in the game. This is a letter that is “preaching to choir” so to speak. The intent of the letter is not evangelism – not trying to draw more people to Christ. In fact, there are only two brief references to Christ in the five chapters of the letter. Instead, this letter is an instruction for those who have already embraced Christ, who already understand that salvation comes as a free gift through grace and faith. James provides moral exhortations and wisdom, practical ways of living – covering everything from the way we speak to each other, our business practices, dealing with trials and temptations, responses to people in need, and our life together as a Christian community.

James says to them, “You must understand this, my beloved siblings...” You must understand how to live in community and “hearing” is not enough. For James it was important

¹ Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Doubleday, 1996. p726

to remember, to remember the empty tomb and the sacrifice of Jesus because memory will lead to action. And for James it was about communal memory, memory of oppression and injustice and the memory of joy and hope. James is carrying the mantle of the Hebrew prophets like Isaiah.

Isaiah was writing to a people seeking to organize themselves and their practices after years of exile. While the people were tasting freedom after their displacement, there was significant tension in the community. In his commentary on this portion of Isaiah, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann highlights the disputes the people were facing, namely how inclusive should they be and what will justice look like. We see different facets of these struggles in the books that tell of the rebuilding effort – historical books like Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophets Haggai, Micah, Zechariah. As the returning exiles had intermarried with non-Hebrews during their time away, there was a push toward marrying within the Jewish faith and a return to a culture focused on outward devotion to the one Lord God of Israel. The book of Isaiah offers a counternarrative, with the hope of rebuilding an inclusive Jerusalem with an emphasis on caring for neighbors. Brueggemann states that the “text makes an argument for faith that is focused on neighborly needs in a generous and concrete way, clearly an advocacy to counter self-indulgent worship....This accent anticipates a faithful community fully engaged in the large human questions of the day” ²

Our narrative this morning provides a contrast between false and hypocritical worship and true devotion. Before the first few verses I read, God rejects the people's fasting and rituals because they are accompanied by injustice and exploitation. The Lord then says through Isaiah, “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?” Instead, the prophet Isaiah reveals that to God, a true ritual of fasting involves righteous acts of justice and mercy.

False worship is characterized by people engaging in worship and rituals like fasting, yet still seeking their own pleasure, treating their workers improperly, quarrelling and fighting. The passage explains that while Israel was observant in their religious rituals, their hearts were distant and their actions self-serving, oppressing others.

True worship, according to God, is not merely an outward show, but it involves genuine humility, compassion for the poor and needy, and justly treating others. True rituals that honor God are days where the people act to remove the chains of oppression; to untie the cords that bind people in untenable situations. They are days where the people share food with the hungry, provide shelter for the poor, and clothe the naked. They are rituals that honor the Sabbath because, rather than pursuing individual pleasures, the people do the Lord's work. This type of worship serves a world that needs God. And this type of worship will renew you and renew the world: “Your light will break forth like the dawn.”

²Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66. Westminster Bible Companion*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1998; p165.

We belong to God. In life and in death and in life after death, we belong to God. The Church exists to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ through service to a world that needs God.

We belong to God and as a people who belong to God, we worship God through service. We worship God with our voices that cry out over the injustices of the treatment of our immigrant neighbors. We worship God with our feet that walk to end hunger here in the greater Lansing area and around the world. We worship God with our hands painting walls at Cass Community Services, stocking the food pantry, and clearing vines from the Prayer Path. We worship God with prayers for those affected by natural disasters. We worship God by sharing our financial resources through our unified budget which supported over 20 different organizations in 2024. And we worship God by remembering the saints who have come before us. Saints who have loved and supported us individually and communally. Saints who brought joy through their piano playing and built community around their love of baseball and sports. Saints who served faithfully on church committees and greeted folks in Fellowship Hall. Saints who supported service opportunities like the CROP Walk for oh so many years.

Yes, there is much in this world that makes us despair. And there is much in this world to be grateful for. On this Sunday in November, a quarter of the way through the 21st century, we give thanks that we are a people called to serve. To serve a world that so desperately needs know that we worship a God of justice, a God who teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to even love our enemies. To serve a world where the values of inclusiveness and welcome of every child created in the image of God becomes a unifying rallying cry. To serve a world that so desperately needs hope for a brighter tomorrow that comes from a God whose love is infinite and vast beyond comprehension, a love that will not let us go as the choir will sing.

In two weeks on November 16, we will have an opportunity to share our gratitude for the opportunities to serve a world that needs God. If you have not received a stewardship packet, please let me know and we will get you one. The packet includes a stewardship booklet sharing the ways we have used your financial gifts for worship, faith formation, stewardship of our facility, care for each other and our outreach, mission and service to the world. It also includes a pledge card and time and talent sheet where you can offer your gifts to serve a world that needs God. Join me in prayer.