

## **“Barns and Beasts of Burden”**

**Isaiah 58**

**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**September 13, 2009**

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**First Christian Church**

**Omaha, Nebraska**

God’s Glory our rear guard. The light shall break forth like the dawn and healing shall spring forth *quickly!* This is God’s hope for us. This is how God “chastises” us –holds us accountable. Isaiah tells us God is not pleased with our false forms of fasting, worshipping, or ways of living our faith filled lives. And God speaks to us, gently, lovingly, yet honestly. These words are how we are to live our lives. These words are the trumpet shouting out to begin our 5 weeks of prayerfully learning about poverty in Omaha. God’s words are filled with honesty and love for us today and into the future. The burden is heavy now, yes; but working with God leads to delight! Listen!

Isaiah begins his speech with God’s command to shout. Don’t hold back. We shouldn’t be afraid to speak the truth to one another, even if the truth is hard to face and hear. If we speak the truth, and seek to live in ways that are caring and compassionate with one another, then we will have the light of God to lead us, and the glory of God to travel in our wake. People will see the glow of God before us, and as we leave, they are left with the gift of God’s warming presence. As the church, the family of God, we know this is our future, our work, and our calling in the world. We’re to delight in God and one another in ways that bring about this light glorious parade of dancing delight. But we aren’t there yet.

God does not call us to shallow worship,  
or back breaking labor.

God sees, on the day of our worship, all we do is please ourselves,  
and exploit our workers.<sup>1</sup>

God calls us to worship that loosens the chains of injustice  
and unties the cords of the yoke.

God call us to worship that sets the oppressed free,  
and to shatter this burdensome yoke.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Isaiah 58:3b

Isaiah tells us that God wants you, and you, and everyone to be freed from the things that we're strapped to or struggling against. And this is the fast, this is the way of living, worshipping, working, and being together that we should care about. While we may not work in fields or strap animals to yokes of work, Isaiah points out that we are all strapped in some way to burdensome tasks in life.

The yoke of oppression Isaiah's people burdened beneath was the oppressive rule of the Assyrian Empire. Making treaties with individuals, as well as regional leaders, this Empire effectively pitted neighbor against neighbor. Isaiah not only speaks against this back biting behavior, but he also knocks out the arrogant filled sails of these people. Fasting and worshipping God, while working against your neighbor is not God's idea of worship or glory. Instead worship should bring yourself and others near to God.

The Israelites were guilty of seeking out a relationship with God, while destroying the relationships they had with their own neighbors. We are guilty of the same actions. As we keep people in poverty relegated to homeless shelters and street corners, and enter our beautiful buildings of worship, we are most certainly guilty of the same thing. Yet as Isaiah spoke to his people, he speaks to us today. It is not too late. God's hope, love, and vision for us are always possible.

Like all the other prophets, Isaiah exposes poverty as one of the primary yokes of oppression we have and still struggle against. Economic or material depravity only scratches upon the surface of the impoverished state addressed in the Bible and played out on our streets everyday. While we speak of low wages, poor housing, and diminished education as poverty we still miss the despair of poverty and homelessness. Behind the lack of these life sustaining assets and materials are severed relationships amongst all people of the community.

As we begin to explore poverty here in Omaha, we will fail to fully understand poverty, however, if we fail to form a relationship with people. We tend to treat the poor cleaning women, or the garbage collectors as creatures doing a task, carrying our load. Yet we are guilty of placing the yokes, the devise used to harness the strength and productivity of animals

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Is 58:6

such as oxen, horses, or mules, onto the backs of people, when we fail to look our cleaning woman in the eye. We keep her strapped in when we don't know her name, if she is married and has children; or what she dreams of as she cleans our floor and empties our trash. We strap this onto the garbage collector because his work, the way he contributes to our society is necessary. We strap ourselves next to them because we fail to see their full humanity. And rather than looking at one another, we're together harnessed, looking forward at a false sense of community.

As the yoke of the Israelites was burdensome, so too are today's yokes. We find ourselves caught in shallow relationships of productivity, rather than relationships of holy, God-filled delight. The story of a woman named Judith displays what can come of these shallow ways of relating to one another. Judith had the choice between remaining in an abusive marriage or endure homelessness and poverty by getting herself and her children out of this dangerous situation. Choosing safety Judith divorced her husband and became homeless. As her ex-husband followed them from place to place, Judith could not hold down a job, or retain a permanent home for her kids. The lack of income, safe housing, or a supportive community only caused deeper struggles. Her ex-husband's refusal to pay child support forced Judith and her four children into poverty and dependence upon public assistance.<sup>3</sup>

For Judith the yoke is very layered and is connected to many people – yet she is not connected to them in life sustaining ways. The limiting way we relate to one another fuels isolation; subsequently leading Judith and her family into an economic hardship she couldn't avoid or get relief from. Her inability to secure a stable home, employment, and protection from the threat of an abusive ex-husband limited Judith's ability to be a mother, an employee, and a full human being. In our world today, Judith found herself choosing between the yoke of a violent marriage, or the yoke of an impoverished living situation. God calls us to change these things. As Judith carried this burden of her family's safety alone, we as her neighbors can not only find ways to lighten this load, but we also can begin to find ways to break this yoke from her back as well as the back of many others in similar situations.

God does not call us to shallow lives or  
burdensome work.

God sees our worship ending in fighting and dissension,

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from <http://www.povertyaction.org/stories/judithwhitely.cfm>

Where our words hit like a fist,  
rather than welcoming with the Word.  
Where our eyes pierce the soul,  
rather than shine with the Light.<sup>4</sup>

God calls us to share our food and spirits with the hungry,  
to provide shelter for the wandering body and tired heart.  
God calls us to turn toward our kin, our neighbors.<sup>5</sup>

While Judith's story is most certainly tragic, it is not the only path leading families and people into poverty. As we're called to break the yoke for Judith, we're also called to learn and bring about transformation and change for all people. Throughout the next 5 weeks of our Urban Poverty series we're going to learn about the many reasons and factors that make people susceptible to living in poverty. Our education will only take us so far, however. It's the love of God found within one another that will assuredly lead to this breaking – the breaking of bondage forged through loving relationships. We are all kin not because we're all strapped to this yoke, but rather we're all kin because God delights in seeing us break this yoke for one another and ourselves. In this looking at and listening to one another, God's light fills the space, enveloping us in transforming love.

We cannot know the burden, or how to break it, if we do not listen to one another. While in Bosnia I visited a family farm to see their house and barn. Little Borris, around age 4 came out to greet us with his grandmother and little sister. As he delighted in stickers and blowing bubbles, his grandmother explained that her son and daughter-in-law were in the fields. The grandmother told us this story.

Their sturdy barn was built almost immediately after the end of the Balkan War in the mid 90s. Knowing this predominately agricultural part of the country was devastated by the war an International Non-Government Organization came in to help with the rebuilding process. Plowing through this part of the country they built barns for every family. These structures were important to house the cattle, chickens and goats that would enable the families to start farming again. This was most certainly a need in the community. After the barn was built however, this family, like many of the other families in the area continued to keep any livestock still alive tied or

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Isaiah 58:4

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Isaiah 58:7

caged up outside. The families moved into the barns for they had no home for themselves.

The generosity of this NGO was tremendous, and they most certainly met a need. Without a relationship with the people immediately affected by war, however, this NGO kept these people trapped and strapped to the yoke. Without any access to financial support, or building materials, these poor farmers were left with no other choice than to live in a barn made for beasts of burden, rather than a home for a family. Without listening to this community this NGO was not able to bring about a transformation for these people.

*When we see one another; seeing the tiredness in their eyes and weary shoulders we can begin to lift off that yoke. When we listen to one another, and know where this yoke is cutting into their dreams, dreams that would surely enhance and flow into our own, we begin to make cracks into that yoke. When we hear their story and how this yoke has stopped their bodies and spirits from flourishing then together, we'll discern the ways to shatter the yoke that is strapped to both of our backs.*

*When we break these yokes of oppression we'll discover walking in solidarity and love, rather than sorrowful work. Our work will become liberation and our prodding walk will become our dance.*

God does not call us for shallow relationships with God or one another.

God sees only one day where we humble ourselves in prayer and worship; where we expect to be heard and loved by God.<sup>6</sup>

God calls us to listen to one another so everyday our light will break forth

like the dawn, and the curing relationships will quickly appear.

When listening to one another, together we call,  
and God will say, "Here I am!"<sup>7</sup>

Every person dreams of a better future. What would it be like to dream together of this future, this in-breaking of God into our world? Can you just imagine what that would be like? What would that feel like? I think Isaiah has it correct in that it would be sheer delight! It would be the ultimate

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Isaiah 58:4b-5

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from Isaiah 58:8-9

delighting in God as we delight in one another! Honor God through honoring one another. I hope this series is only the beginning of our yoke breaking and light bringing to our world. God did not create us to be strapped as beasts of burden to yokes of oppression; instead, God created us with the compassion and courage to break these yokes. God does not delight in storing people away in barns of despair or stalls of isolation; instead, God created us to delight in God and one another.

God claims, if we spend ourselves on behalf of the hungry,  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then our light will rise in the darkness  
and night will become like the noonday.

The yoke will break, and work will be liberation and worship.

God will guide us always, calling the Sabbath delight in one another.<sup>8</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Isaiah 58:10-11, 13