

A Fast from Injustice

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18,000 children were homeless in Wisconsin last year – sleeping in shelters, hotels, vehicles, on park benches, and couch surfing. A significant portion of our homeless children live right here in Madison where the city has deemed it a crime to sleep on the streets.

49,000 children in Wisconsin have no health insurance and the number of uninsured children is expected to double to nearly 100,000 if the Affordable Care Act is repealed.

Wisconsin schools served 50 million free or reduced lunches last year. While there were many more students who could have benefited from but did not qualify for this service, for the students who did qualify these meals made the difference between academic success and failure. And yet, these services are at risk of being cut as our national and state administration seeks to privatize and profit off-of education.

We tout with pride our high-school graduation rates in Wisconsin – 88% percent of high-school students received diplomas, beating the national average of 82%. Yet, is this something which really warrants pride and celebration? More than 7,000 students did not graduate from high-school. And of those students who did graduate only 66% enrolled in college. That means every year nearly 30,000 young adults are entering Wisconsin's work force with a high-school diploma or less.

\$24,000 is the poverty-line designated income for a family of four in Wisconsin. \$24,000! While the statisticians and economists have their reasons for having come up with this number, the number is criminal. What family of four, let alone a single person, can survive and thrive on an income of \$24,000.

And yet, we've turned "entitlement" into a dirty word, as though having the tools one needs to create the life she or he seeks is a luxury reserved for the deserving. So, we cut budgets and limit access to

resources and programs and then we tell people to go and be successful. And when our brothers and sisters are unable to achieve the standards of success set for them by others, we point our fingers at them and cite their inability to overcome all the obstacles that we have placed in their way as our justification for eliminating and defunding programs rather than further investing in and improving the programs which can lead to our communal success. We do all of this, while, as Isaiah says, speaking evil through dehumanizing and humiliating rhetoric and lies, as well as criminalizing and exploiting.

If you don't believe me, hear this: The number of African-American men, women and children, not including our poor brothers and sisters of other races, the combined number of African-Americans who have been incarcerated in the last 50 years exceeds the number of Africans and African-Americans who were actually enslaved during the 245 years of legalized slavery. This year alone, 2.2 million people will be confined to jails and prisons, with 16,000 people living in cages right here in Madison. And the Department of Justice, along with our new Attorney General, and our new President, have made it clear they intend to expand the privatization of prisons, a multi-billion-dollar industry, while cracking down on pot-smoking men and women, boys and girls, through a Get Tough on Crime approach otherwise known as "Stop and Frisk" and Racial Profiling, while no longer holding police departments accountable for their overtly racist practices. There is an abundance of money to be made through the oppression and exploitation of God's most vulnerable people and it is playing out right in front of us.

"Cry out vociferously, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a shofar! Proclaim to my people their role in the oppression which is being heaped upon my children!" The Lord God, the Great Hashem, says to Isaiah.

There is an urgency in today's text. The urgency exists not only in the conditions about which Isaiah speaks but also in the way God instructs Isaiah to use his voice.

My understanding of God's instruction to Isaiah comes directly from the Hebrew language. God tells Isaiah to "Cry out vociferously" to cry out in a way which is disruptive, loud, and insistent and which demands attention. The Hebrew word for "trumpet" in this text is "shofar." A shofar is a very specific horn used almost exclusively for the announcement of war. "Raise your voice like a shofar!" God instructs, "Announce to my people their willful rebellion!"

Isaiah is sounding the war horn. He is disrupting the silence and peace of his contemporaries - of Hebrew men and women, who despite their captivity in Babylon, are also educated and wealthy, able to ensure that all their needs and wants are met. Isaiah's message was not directed to those struggling to survive and thrive under oppressive forces. Isaiah's message was directed to people like us, people who were benefiting from the oppression and exploitation of others.

At the center of this text is an important question with significant relevance for us tonight. As we enter into the season of Lent and prepare to engage in a 40-day journey of intentional spiritual discipline with the hope of growing closer to God, God asks, through the Prophet Isaiah, "Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down your head like a bulrush, and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"

Fasting is an important ancient spiritual practice which moves us to dependence upon, repentance before, and stronger relationship with God. And yet, in this text God has much to say about how and why we fast. God who called and continues to call the nations through the prophets to practice social justice, to promote the cause of the orphans and widows, to act justly with one another, and to not oppress the alien, this God, chooses justice over worship. "Surely, this is the fast that I choose," God says, "to break open the shackles of wickedness, to undo the bonds of injustice, and to let the oppressed go free, and to annual all wrongdoing." God, through Isaiah, is calling us to fast from injustice. To

willfully and actively remove ourselves from as well as dismantle the systems and institutions which exploit some in order to benefit others.

God is calling us to a fast which involves identifying the conditions which allow for 18,000 children to be homeless in Wisconsin each year and 49,000 to currently have no health insurance with the risk of many more becoming uninsured.

God is calling us to a fast which requires us to understand the complexities of our capitalist economy the requirement of poverty for capitalism to thrive – poverty which results in 50 million free and reduced lunches in Wisconsin each year; poverty which is perpetuated each time any teenager drops out of high-school or is unable to attend college.

God is calling us to a fast which involves rebellion against policies which set the poverty level so low that many struggling families are considered not poor enough to qualify for support.

God is calling us to a fast to willingly reject systems, institutions, and public discourse which dehumanizes and criminalizes men, women, and children of color and our poor their brothers and sisters of all races.

God is calling us to a fast to stand up against the forces which seek to further perpetuate the oppression and exploitation of the most vulnerable in our society:

A fast which demands that our administration serve the people rather than the powers;

A fast which demands an end to private prisons;

A fast which demands an end to racist and hostile policing like “stop and frisk” and racial profiling;

And a fast which demands that our public servants are held to high standards rather than given free passes to say and do whatever they like.

“This is fast that I choose,” says our God.

God, through the Prophet Isaiah tells us, that if we seek to truly know God, to have a stronger relationship with God, then our fast from injustice must take us to where God is most present. And the person of Jesus, his life, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection, tells us that God is most present where there is oppression and exploitation.

Of all the people in whom God chose to reside in a very unique way, God chose Jesus. A Palestinian Jew living under Roman Occupation; the son of an unwed, teenage mother; birthed in a barn without the medical care of a midwife; a child of a refugee family seeking asylum in a foreign country to escape the government led genocide of an entire generation of children. Friend, advocate, and companion to the most shamed and stigmatized in society. Teacher and mentor to the undereducated and underemployed. Feeder of the masses, of people whose bodies were dying from lack of physical and spiritual nourishment. Critic of the church and the state for their roles in the oppression, subjugation, and exploitation of God's people. Political scape goat, who without defense or trial was deemed guilty and sentenced to death. If we are looking for God, then we need look no further than the person and life of Jesus. For where Jesus was, there God will be.

To fast from injustice, to willfully and actively seek justice and reject injustice, requires that we move from talk to action, from distance to presence, from other to friend. And, when we do this, Isaiah tells us we will encounter God.

“Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say,

‘Here I am.’”

The cross is our promise that God is not only present in the pain and suffering of the world but that God is transforming that which is harmful, hateful, and life-depriving, into that which brings forth life, love, liberation, and peace. We enter into our fast from injustice with the hope of this cross. Isaiah preached these words, sounded God's war cry, not to shame the people but to motivate them to hopeful action. The ancient Hebrews found hope in God's promise that the Word of God will not stop until it has accomplished what it intends to do. And as Christians we find our hope in the resurrected Word, in Jesus the Christ, and the promise of transformation that his resurrection brings to all people, places and circumstances.

Isaiah tells us that when we fast from injustice, we will meet God and we will be transformed and we will become transformational – we will become the living promise of the cross. “You will be the light in the darkness,” Isaiah says, “and your gloom, your sorrow will be as bright as the noonday sun. The Lord will guide you continually, satisfying all of your needs, and fill you with a never-ending supply of strength and courage. And you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets.”

With an urgent hope, Isaiah lifted his voice like a war horn, sounding a battle cry, disrupting our silence and demanding our attention. With an equally urgent hope we are called to the fast that God chooses – the fast from injustice. So during this season of Lent and every day afterwards, may we together raise our voices, cry out vociferously, and sound our war horns, disrupting the silence and demanding attention for the suffering and pain of God's people and God's world, confident that God will be with us on the journey.

AMEN.