

# Is this the fast that I choose?

Sermon 173 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 22, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-12

Everywhere we have lived, Justin and I have had to figure out which direction the house was facing. Like which way was north, south, etc. We've had a few houses, all facing different directions and the orientation or direction is important to know because how the sunlight shines in through the windows really can impact the way you live!

Some of you may not know this yet because the majority of our time here in Raleigh has been dominated by the pandemic and adjusting to life in the post-pandemic fatigue; but Justin and I love to host dinner parties. We love having people at our house, we love preparing food and thinking about our friends who will enjoy it. We love setting the tables, and heating up the grill. We even love *cleaning* the house to get it all ready. And hear me when I say, this is the only time we all love cleaning. On an ordinary cleaning day, I am the only one who gets excited about the end result but when there's a guest coming over, a dinner party on the horizon, everyone chips in and it's a joyous occasion.

We lived in this one house that was especially great for entertaining. Windows all along the back wall which (in the daytime) allowed the light to illuminate the whole common area - dining space, living area, kitchen. We loved hosting there. But we soon realized that after we would spend all day cleaning and preparing the house, we'd move into the kitchen and start working on the food, knowing everything else had been done. And without fail, the sun would set in those West facing windows creating a beautiful scene, but *just* before you could see the beauty of it all, the brightest, most blinding light would pierce through, making it hard to even stand in the room, unless your back was facing the wall of windows.

But when we turned our backs to avoid being blinded by the light, the strangest thing happened. Our gaze shifted from the outside to the inside. And when the light shone through to the inside our eyes befell the most horrifying of scenes: dust bunnies.

Dust bunnies! Dancing all over the freshly cleaned floors. Dust bunnies that we must have missed when we were taking care of the chores earlier in the day. Dust bunnies that must have been lurking in the corners, under the sofa, or in the recesses of the pantry which was closed before but now was wide open because we had moved on to the food preparation phase of our hosting. Dust bunnies, we couldn't see before the setting sun shone its brightest light directly in, forcing us to turn our backs to the more pleasant scenery outside and look instead inward to reckon with all the stuff that we'd much prefer to keep hidden away. (There were even bunnies we *\*thought\** we had already addressed... and there they were... how was it possible? How were they still there?!)

This experience has always reminded me of our relationship with God... because as we journey together with God, there are times when we want to look outward, toward our church family, our neighbors, our community, and our world. And there are also times when we need to turn and look inward, facing the (often more uncomfortable) things in the recesses of our hearts that need our attention. This is difficult spiritual work. It is vulnerable as we allow God to show us the things that we need to get honest about, the things we need to confess, the things for which we need to repent, the things that remind us that despite our best efforts toward perfection and success, we. are. still. human.

We are sinful, we are broken... and yet we are still loved by God.

We may prefer to look outward, but Ash Wednesday and the whole season of Lent is our invitation to pivot, just for a season, and to turn inward. This essential turn is exactly what the prophet Isaiah speaks to in the reading tonight. The people are looking outward and asking God to act with vengeance, to bring justice upon their foreign enemies. But God (through the lips of the prophet) says: No, before you ask for my intervention with them, let us first examine you.

You who fast and pray for your own self-interests,  
You who oppress your own workers  
You who are so quick to quarrel and fight with one another  
You who are so proud you've forgotten how to be humble...

Let us first examine you and remember that the fast God chooses is (according to Isaiah)  
to loose the bonds of injustice  
to undo the thongs of the heavy yoke  
to let the oppressed go free

This is the fast that God has chosen and so the first question for us this season of Lent is: is this the fast that we also will choose? Are we willing to turn inward, taking a look at ourselves in light of this measuring stick? Or will we continue to ask for God's intervention with our enemies, ignoring our role, our complicity, our blinders that protect our sense of self-congratulation?

Is this the fast that we might choose: to become vulnerable and open and honest enough to turn our gaze inward, just for a while, so that we might see what lurks in the corners, like dust bunnies dancing in the evening sun after being hidden away just moments before.

Can we allow ourselves the grace and the courage to be honest and to come before God with *all* that we are.

The good, the bad, the ugly...  
The broken and sinful...  
The pieces of us that we know well and also the pieces of us we are still discovering...

Can we bring it all to God knowing that *this fast*, painful as it may seem, is the only one that leads to life.

In just a few moments we will all have an opportunity to choose this fast, this journey toward repentance, humility, and honesty before God. When we are ready to say yes to the Lenten journey, we will anoint our heads with ashes as a symbol that we are merely human, we are broken and imperfect. But before we do that, let us spend a few moments in reflection. The labyrinth on the front of the bulletin is an ancient spiritual tool that is symbolic of the journeys of life and faith. As we enter this new journey tonight, the journey of Lent, we are invited to trace the path of the labyrinth with our finger. As you trace the path inward ask yourself: *What do I need to let go of in order to really be honest with God during this season of seeking?*

*And when you reach the center of the labyrinth, pause for a moment and give thanks for what is...*

Then, as you trace the path away from the center and back toward the starting point, ask yourself: *What do I need to receive in order to grow closer to God during this season of seeking?*

*"You were made from dust, and to dust you will return."*