

February 5, 2023
Lectionary 5, Year A
The 5th Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 58:1-12
https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/edys/hd_edys.htm
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Showing Up

Every day, when I pick John and Cyrus up at school, we have the same conversation that thousands, maybe millions of parents are having with their children across the country, in cars, or at bus stops, or when the kids walk through the door, getting home from school. “How was your day?”

John often has after school activities. So, more often than not, it’s just Cyrus and me in the car. I’ve learned that when Cyrus tells me it was a “low key W” day that means it was a good day. A “win”. Of course, it’s only a “low key” W, because, honestly, how excited can a sixth grader allow himself to be about a school day. Sometimes the day was an “L” which, of course, means a loser of a day. Thank goodness that my kids are willing to translate for me so that I understand the latest slang. Sometimes the day was just a day. A “meh” day, nothing good, nothing bad.

My next question, as I’m sure it is for many other parents across the country is, “Did you learn anything new?” Sometimes I just get a side eye at that one, like “Come on, Mom, why would you expect me to learn something at school?” But sometimes they have something to tell me. A new song started in chorus. A new concept introduced in math, a story that they read in ELA, something that they learned in French class or history class, something that made the day worth the effort.

This fall, there was one of those days, Cyrus could hardly wait for me to ask the question “Did you learn anything new?” to tell me something he had learned in history that he thought would be really interesting to me.

Cyrus is studying world history in sixth grade, and apparently, this fall they were studying ancient Mesopotamian civilizations. One of the things that he learned about their religious practices.

The culture that he was learning about on the day that I’m talking about was the Sumerian culture, and he had learned that the people in that culture had made statues of themselves praying, which they would put in the Temples of their gods. Apparently, his teacher told him that they did that so that they could trick the gods into thinking that they were really there praying while they went off to do other things, working or living their family lives.

He thought that was a fascinating thing and, honestly, he thought that it would be a good thing for me to talk about in a sermon. He’s reminded me of it periodically since then, figuring that if he gives me good sermon material, it shouldn’t go to waste. Of course, I told him that I can’t just stick a story in a sermon if it doesn’t go along with the scripture readings, I have to wait for the right for the right moment, the right Sunday to tell a story. That was a little bit frustrating to him, but he did understand.

So, imagine how happy I was when read today’s first reading, which, by the way, is one of my favorite and also one of my least favorite readings from the Old Testament and realized that it might be time for the Sumerian praying statues to come to church.

Also, imagine how unhappy I was when I realized the Cyrus wouldn’t be here for this morning’s service today, because of a basketball game. At first, I thought he wouldn’t get to hear this long-awaited sermon, but then we

realized that he would be home in time for the Zoom service, so that he would get to see if I did justice to his statues.

When I told him that the time for the Sumerian statues had come, he cautioned me to look it up, to make sure he had it right, to make sure he remembered correctly and that his history teacher had it right. So, I did. I researched Sumerian worship practices for this sermon and found that his history teacher was right, but that the Metropolitan Museum of Art puts a different spin on the statues and their purpose.

According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the praying statues were used because only the highest level of priests were allowed into the Temples, into the presence of the gods, so people who would have statues of themselves carried into the Temples, so that they could gain access to the gods. According to Sumerian beliefs, the statues embodied the essence of the worshiper, indicating that the worshiper was spiritually present, worshipping the god, even when the person's physical body was elsewhere.

Of course, only the wealthy could afford to build statues of themselves, so they were the ones who received whatever spiritual or material benefit was available from being "constantly at prayer" while people who were poor, which, of course, was most of the people, had to work out their own relationship with the gods in whatever way that they could figure out.

I can understand they Cyrus's history teacher presented this statue idea as a religious work around. Perhaps he is someone, perhaps he knows someone, who thinks it would be a convenient way to fulfill one's religious obligations to just have a statue put in his place of worship. "See, I'm praying." "See, I'm worshipping." And then he could just do whatever he wanted. If he

was a Christian, maybe he was thinking that the Sumerian praying statue method would be a nice way to free up his Sunday mornings.

Just as a note, like I did last Sunday, this Sunday's Old Testament reading makes me feel like we are being rushed to Lent. Last week, our Old Testament reading was the source of the questions that are asked in the what are called the Solemn Reproaches on Good Friday. Today our Old Testament reading is one of the two possible Old Testament readings on Ash Wednesday, asking the question, as we begin our Lenten fast, "What fast does God choose?"

So, what does the Old Testament reading have to do with Sumerian praying statues, when the Sumerian dynasty was long gone even by the time this passage from Isaiah was written, and was many, many thousands of years in the past by the time we're reading it.

This reading is about people going through the motions of worship, which, in Cyrus's history teacher's cynical view, was the point of the Sumerian praying statues; so that people could go through the motions of worship, could look like they were worshipping when, really, they were out and about, doing their own thing, whatever their own thing was.

Believe me the irony of the fact that Cyrus is not here to hear the sermon that he has been looking forward to in person because he is at a basketball game has not escaped me. I thought about bringing a statue of him to this morning's worship service, but then I thought that would be taking things a bit too far.

There could be a more legitimate, spiritual reason for the statues, but it's not unreasonable for someone to be cynical about the sincerity of a person's worship. The historical record of people trying to skirt around the worship practices and the moral demands of the religion that they profess to

follow is pretty deep, pretty compelling; maybe even enough to make someone believe that it's been going on since the dawn of recorded history.

We hear about it here, in our Old Testament reading, when, through the prophet Isaiah, God tells the people of Israel exactly what God thinks of them and their worship practices. Isaiah writes:

¹Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

²Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵Is 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? (Isaiah 58:1-5)

God saw their worship, saw their fasting, saw their acts of repentance, as they laid in sackcloth and ashes and God saw their lives, and the two things did not line up.

Their holy days were not holy, their acts of worship and repentance did not change their behavior, did not transform them, did not make them into a people who kept the law; into a people who did justice and loved kindness. They threw their religious righteousness in God's face and wondered why God was unimpressed. But God knew that their religion was performative, designed not to transform their lives, designed not to change them, but to compel God to act on their behalf.

"See, look, God, I'm praying, I'm worshiping, I'm fasting, I'm repenting." Aren't you impressed?

"No."

This is what God seeks from the people who claim to be God's worshipers. Not less worship, but more transformation. Through the prophet God shares what kind of worship God wants:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?
7Is 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)

Worship that does not transform is called out. It is not true worship. If people go through the motions of worship and then treat others as if they had never heard of a God whose law and love protects those who are poor, those who are widowed and orphaned, those who are strangers in the land, then the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has not truly been worshiped.

So, yikes!

Yikes for them, yikes for us.

I said that this was one of my favorite passages from the Old Testament. And it is. I also said that it's one of my least favorite passages from the Old Testament. And it is.

It's one of my least favorite passages because I am convicted by it. Is what I say in worship, what I commit myself to in worship reflected in my daily life? Is it?

In Confirmation class last week, we talked about worship, and I told the kids that one of the main reasons that we do what we do in worship is because it reflects what we believe about the nature of the God that we worship.

But I know, and if I didn't already know it, this reading would tell me that our lives are supposed to reflect the nature of that God too. And I wonder, sometimes, if mine does, when I leave this place, at least as

consistently as its supposed to. So that's why I struggle with this reading. It all feels kind of conditional. And I'm not sure, day to day if I'm measuring up.

But this is also one of my favorite readings and here's why. Because the promises of God are so good; so beautiful, so hopeful and hope filled. They are promises of the kind of world that I want to live in, the kind of person I want to be, the kind of community I want to be a part of it. Listen to this:

⁸Then 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.

^{9a}Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

^{9b}If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

¹⁰if 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.

¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in (Isaiah 58:8-12).

The abundance, the hope, the joy, the peace that is promised here.
Imagine.

But we don't have to imagine. All that is described here has been promised to us already, it is our heavenly hope, not because we are good enough, not because our worship is sincere enough; but because God is good enough, gracious enough, merciful enough, loving enough in Jesus Christ.

Still, here's what I wonder. Even though I believe that the good and peaceful cities, the restored generations, the abundant providing care for all of us and for creation are God's heavenly promise to us in Jesus Christ, I have to wonder how much of those promises could we experience now? How much of that goodness, that peace, that healing, that peace, that restoration could be loose in the world now, if God's people were committed to seeing God's justice, God's peace, God's healing, God's love take root in our lives and our world now.

Honestly, given the brokenness of sin that is on display for us every day, I'm not sure. But if worship can shape us into people whose deep, deep desire is for the goodness that God promises to be experienced for all people, for all of creation, now, then, with all that we have, and all that we are, with our bodies, our souls, our minds, our energy, our talents, that is worth showing up for. Amen.