

Seeking: Is this the fast I choose?

Gathering

Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.
This week, it would be appropriate to find a **purple cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in a time of preparation. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.

Listen - Listen, in the silence, Listen in the Noise



Gathering

Today we begin our preparations for Easter.

Over the next 6 weeks or so we will be exploring the theme: Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith.

Each week we will explore a question - sometimes, like tonight, a question God is asking us; and sometimes it will be a question we might be asking God.

Throughout this time, it is my hope and prayer that you will find as much peace and joy in the asking of questions as there may be in the answers.

Did you know: in the gospels, Jesus is asked 187 questions - he answers (maybe) 8 of them.

Jesus, himself, asks 307 questions...

I am sure that faith is not about certainty, but about learning to ask, and sit in the complexity of, good, honest questions.

Light Candle

We light the candle - focussing our attention, allowing ourselves to be drawn to its flame. We look to Jesus, the light of the world, a light that shines even in the darkest of times offering hope and healing.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Ancient of Days, breathed life into this Land and her Peoples.

From time beyond our reckoning the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have blessed this place through their care and concern.

We pay our respects to their Elders and Leaders, past and present and emerging, and we pray for the future of their communities.

May we walk gently and respectfully on this Land.

(c) 2017, A.Koh-Butler, This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here

Call to Worship

We gather together at the edge of a new season.

We stand together on the cusp of something new.

Will we wade into self-reflection?

Will we invite honesty to dance?

Will we listen for God's invitation?
Will we seek deeper faith?
What kind of fast do we choose? What kind of faith will we build?
We gather together at the edge, ready to take another step.
Listen, God is speaking.

Prayer for illumination

God, we want to hear your voice.
Shout loudly;
don't hold back.
Move in our spirits the way you moved over the waters of creation.
We are beginning a new season today, God,
and we don't want to begin anything without you.
So speak to us today—
through silence,
through scripture,
through song.
Speak to us as you spoke to the Israelites so many moons ago.
Speak to us like a gentle breeze or a loud trumpet.
We don't care how, we just long to hear your voice.
So don't hold back.
We are here.
We are listening. Amen.

Call To Confession

In a moment we will hear from Isaiah 58.
Here, Isaiah tells the story of people who are trying hard to be faithful. They ask God,
"God, do you notice? Do you see all the good we're doing? Are you proud of us?"
It sounds a bit like children seeking parental attention. Did we do a good job?
In those moments we always want to hear God say, "Excellent job, good and faithful
servant." But in today's scripture, God says to the people, "I want you to seek justice."

Friends, faith is a constant dance of us asking God, "Am I doing it right?" and, "How can I
do better?"

In the prayer of confession we linger in this tension for a moment.
As we think back through the past weeks, months, years even,
we acknowledge that we are works in progress and we ask for God's help.
God may challenge us, but fortunately, God will never abandon us.
So let us pray...

Confession

Merciful God,
How many times in a day could we choose love?
How many times could we choose justice?
How many times could we speak kindly to ourselves?
How many times could we offer grace?
How many times, God? And how often do we miss it?
Forgive us for choosing the path you did not travel.
Forgive us for hitching our horse to the world's measure of goodness, instead of yours.
Return our hearts to you, and guide us continually, even in the parched places.
With gratitude we pray,

When you are ready, you might like to bring your palm crosses forward and drop them into the tray - it has travelled with us through out the year, offering us a focal point, but now it is time to let it symbolise all that we now need to leave behind as we refocus, turning once more to the God who holds us in grace and love.

Bring palm crosses forward ...

Listen: Hold Us In Your Grace

Words of forgiveness

Family of faith, when a baby is learning to walk, the parents do not criticise the baby for falling. Instead, they celebrate every wobbly step. They applaud every hesitant stand. They cheer when their child lands in their arms.

Surely the same must be true of God.

Although we often lose our way and we often choose the wrong thing, I imagine God cheers with every step we take in God's direction.

So hear and believe the good news of the gospel:

no matter how many times we fall,

no matter how many times we choose the wrong path,

God is waiting for us at the end with open arms.

We are forgiven.

We are invited.

We belong.

Thanks be to God for a love like that. Amen.

Light the crosses

Listening for God's Voice

Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout 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.

² Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practised righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgements,
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.

⁴ Look, 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.

⁵ 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?

⁶ 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?

⁷ 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?

⁸ 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 rearguard.

⁹ 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,

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ The 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.

¹² Your 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.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God!

Reflection

Is this the fast that I choose?

When we begin to prepare for some anticipated celebration, what do we do?

Often, the first thing we do is to sit down and prepare a list of all the things we need to think about, and do.

As we begin this time of preparation for the celebration of Easter, what do we need to be ready?

I have only included one of the readings for Ash Wednesday - from Isaiah 58 - but all of them (Psalm 51, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10) invite us to think about how we approach God and about the nature of our spiritual practices. So one of the first things we need to check is whether our actions match what we profess.

As Isaiah puts it - if outside our religious practices we are fighting or accusing one another or speaking ill of others, then our worship is pointless; if we ignore the cries of people who are hungry, homeless, or hurting, it is meaningless to then give up chocolate or coffee or whatever it is you might be giving up for Lent. And even more so, if after Easter, we simply pick up where we left off.

That is why sometimes, I think it is more useful for us, rather than contemplating what we will give up for a few weeks, to think about what we need to grow in our relationship with God. What does God still need to teach us?

So perhaps, now is the time to again build into your day a practice of daily prayer or contemplation.

Perhaps now is the time to commit to a new form of ministry - a regular engagement with a new group of people or with people you have drifted away from.

Perhaps you know there is some hard personal work to do and now is the time to seek help or to commit to working it through.

Our theme for the next few weeks is about *Seeking*.

What do you need to seek? Or, rather, whom do you need to seek?

What are the questions you need to ask?

What questions are you prepared to let God ask you?

In the words of Isaiah, as we practice *seeking* [this Lent], what kind of fast will you choose?

How will you live your faith?

How will you live the questions of your faith?

In our spiritual practices, in our daily living, will we seek to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (Isaiah 58:6)

Let us pray,

God of grace, God of justice,

you call us to reflect your love and justice in our own living.

And you promise that when we live as you call us to, we will be like beacons in our communities. How we long for our friends and neighbours to see you in us and to come to know your love for them.

So as we come to this special time of reflection and preparation, may your Holy Spirit prompt us, nudge us and shake us out of any complacency; and to so transform our living that our community will encounter you and grow in ways that reflect the world your Son lived, died and rose for. Amen.

Responding

Affirmation of faith - *Inspired by the words of Isaiah 58*

We believe in a God who chooses freedom,

who unties every rope and carries our burdens.

We believe in a God who ushers in the poor and the hungry,

*who has a seat saved for all of us.
We believe in a God whose love is like the sun,
who says, "I'm here, I'm here!" every time we cry.
We believe in a God who walks before us in the parched places,
who rescues our bones,
who tends to us like a gardener.
And because we believe,
we strive to choose love.
Because we believe,
we strive to pursue justice.
Because we believe...
Amen.*

Listen - Land of the Seeking
Prepare the ashes - pound them into ash

Prayer for the ashes

Just yesterday it seems, the palms were fresh and green,
held tight in hands as we re-enacted Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.
But then they dried, shrivelled, became almost too fragile to touch,
until we burned them into the ashes tonight.

Yet, by the grace of our God,
with the Spirit resting upon them,
they are mixed with oil and placed on our heads or hands,
the dust of life resting upon us
as a sign that by sharing the gifts
of peace, reconciliation, justice and generosity,
we will live into the people we long to become.

As we are touched with this mark,
God of all moments,
remind us that just as you shaped humanity from earth's dust,
so, from the ashes of repentance and denial,
that grace which is gifted to us through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer,
will shape us into faithful followers.

Thom Shuman, The Dust of Life, p.5

(Lift the bowls of ashes.)

O God, listen with us in the wilds of this moment,
as we try to find your voice through all the other voices that echo and surround us.

(Mix the oil into the ashes)

Pour your grace upon us and shape us into something new. Amen.

Imposition with ashes

There are so many questions in our heads and in our hearts that do not have answers.
God's voice calls out to us,
through prophets and the murmurings in our hearts,
assuring us,
"My steadfast love for you will never end.
I will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in all of the wildest places."

We do not need to have the answers.
We are human, and God blesses us for every open, honest question we ask in the wilderness of this moment.
Hold on to this grace as you receive ashes today.

Come and receive the mark of ash on the back of your hand.
Return to God with all your heart, and leave the past in ashes

Listen/Sing - With These Ashes

Prayer

Loving God,
Smudged this night with the ashes of penitence,
we will go out to share God's forgiveness with those we have hurt,
with those who are forgotten.
Nurtured this night in the grace of God's healing Spirit,
we will go out to bring healing to the broken,
to offer grace to those trampled by the powerful.
Called this night to journey through suffering to new life,
we will go out to stand with those experiencing injustice,
to share the Spirit's peace and reconciliation with the world.

Thom M Shuman

Sending

Sending and Blessing

As you leave this place,
may God bless you with seeking.
Seek out the hungry.
Seek the weary.
Seek the good in every person you pass.
Seek out the hopeful.
Seek the faithful.
Seek God in each of us.
As you seek and as you wonder,
may you find what you are looking for.
In the name of our loving God,
who is always seeking us,
go now in peace. Amen.

Music as we go: Beautiful Things (Gungor)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyPBtExE4W0>

Based on a liturgies for Ash Wednesday:

Rev. Sarah Speed for A Sanctified Art, "Seeking", 2023, www.sanctifiedart.org

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Ash Wednesday, 2023

The Dust of Life, Thom M Shuman, Wild Goose Publications

Rev Kath Merrifield
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