

Gathering Chant

Gathered here in the mystery of this hour.
Gathered here in one strong body.
Gathered here in the struggle and power.
Spirit, draw near.

Sing for God's Glory

Sing for God's glory that colours
the dawn of creation,
racing across the sky, trailing
bright clouds of elation;
sun of delight succeeds the velvet of night,
warming the earth's exultation.
Sing for God's power that shatters
the chains that would bind us,
searing the darkness of fear and despair
that could blind us,
touching our shame with love that will not lay blame,
reaching out gently to find us.

Sing for God's justice disturbing
each easy illusion,
tearing down tyrants and putting
our pride to confusion;
lifeblood of right, resisting evil and slight,
offering freedom's transfusion.

Sing for God's saints who have travelled
faith's journey before us,
who in our weariness give us their hope
to restore us;
in them we see the new creation to be,
spirit of love made flesh for us.

(Onelicense #48443)

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Amos 5:24

Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Spirit of the Living God

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me
Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me

Melt me, mold me

Fill me, use me

(Used with permission: CCLI)

Isaiah 58:6-12

This is the kind of fast day I'm after:

to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.

What I'm interested in seeing you do is:

sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.

Do this and the lights will turn on,
and your lives will turn around at once.

Your righteousness will pave your way.

The GOD of glory will secure your passage.

Then when you pray, GOD will answer.

You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I am.'

If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims,

quit gossiping about other people's sins,

If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,

Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.

I will always show you where to go.

I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.

You shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

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.

Repairers of the Breach

Since we began staying at home to protect public health I have gotten in the habit of texting friends and family with the greeting, "So how are you holding up during the Apocalypse?" I thought it was funny but then I got to thinking, "Maybe that isn't the best greeting while people are feeling heightened anxiety." Then I read an article by

Catherine Keller about the true definition of the word *apocalypse*. It doesn't mean the end time. Apocalypse actually means *unveiling*.

And there is nothing like a global pandemic to unveil the fissures in our society. As Pastor Dawna pointed out last week, as we are forced to take a break from our constant movement and consuming, we are witnessing how Mother Earth can restore herself when our previous unsustainable ways of living slow down. This pandemic has shown us how our behavior impacts the Earth and it is also shining a harsh light on the ways our behavior harms our society and each other.

Let me name just a few things that have been fully unveiled before us during this time. We have seen the huge evils that are created when we have such vast economic inequality. We understand in a completely new way what is "essential" to the functioning of our society. It turns out that many of the jobs that are absolutely necessary so you and I can eat; our aging parents can get care; our public areas can be cleaned and sanitized; and we can get goods delivered to our homes are some of the lowest paid jobs in our nation. We ask these employees to work for very little in high-risk situations. We offer them free testing but no health care.

We have heard for years just how many people in our nation live from paycheck to paycheck but now we know what that looks like when 22 million people apply for unemployment in such a brief time. Those whose jobs have not been deemed "essential" and who cannot work from home have skyrocketing mortality rates from alcoholism, drug abuse and suicide. Economists call these "deaths of despair."

New data is emerging that highlights just how our racism is impacted by this pandemic. African Americans are being infected with COVID-19 at a higher rate than other citizens of our nation. People of color are also experiencing greater illness and a higher death toll than other Americans. We are seeing just how the inequality of access to health care and economic opportunity points out the underlying racism of our nation. Racism has become a huge public health issue. While the coronavirus doesn't discriminate just how much we human beings do is on clear display.

Our American value of rugged individualism is now on full display. It plays itself out in subtle and not so subtle ways. We have seen protestors at state capitols in Michigan, Kentucky, North Carolina, California and more. They are protesting the "loss of civil liberties" under a "shelter at home" directive. They carry signs like "Give me liberty or give me death" or "I just want to get a haircut." Health care workers have turned up at these protests, wearing protective gear with signs like "Stay Home. Please keep us safe." One political pundit referred to these protestors as "modern day Rosa Parks." But Rosa Parks wasn't protesting a law created during a pandemic to protect public health. You might look at those protestors and just shake your head but that same individualism plays out in most of us. We are becoming frustrated and stir crazy from what looks like it could be endless weeks of staying home. We want to eat out at our favorite restaurant or go to the movies or sing in the church choir or get a haircut or get back to our "normal" lives.

But in reality, for those of us who are sheltering in place and working from home physical distancing has become a mild inconvenience. I have even heard some describe it as a "nice break." But for those who are stocking shelves at the grocery

story, unloading the truck at the pharmacy, working as a Certified Nursing Assistant in a skilled nursing center, picking produce, cleaning hospitals and train stations, providing security in airports, or driving trucks across the country to deliver the goods we think we can't live without right now this is a choice they are making to risk their lives so they can make enough money to feed their families. It is a hard choice.

In these weeks of "safer at home" we have fully witnessed the ways our society and our underlying infrastructure truly doesn't work well for many of our country's citizens or for the citizens of the world. Pope Francis in his Easter sermon this year said that this pandemic has exposed the suffering that is caused when profit is prioritized over people. He says that our civilization which has become "so competitive, so individualistic, with its frenetic rhythms of production and consumption, its extravagant luxuries, its disproportionate profits for just a few — needs to downshift, take stock, and renew itself."

Among the constant barrage of information being hurled at us about the number of infections, number of deaths, number of those seeking unemployment benefits, number of businesses closing, how the stock exchange did today....there is a tiny and persistent voice asking how we want and need to be different as we move into the future. How is this catastrophic time going to impact us as a society in the long run? Will we learn anything? Will we change? When we feel safe to be community to each other again what will be our priorities?

Some of the scriptures that are speaking to me in the midst of this pandemic time have come from the post-exilic era...that time when the exiles returned from Babylonian captivity to rebuild their lives in Jerusalem. What would be their focus? How would exile change them? How would they be different? What would be their first priorities in rebuilding life together?

So grateful to be "home" again they leapt back into the joy of community and religious life together. First and foremost, they had a deep desire to rebuild the temple. All the rituals they had missed doing together became vastly important. Fasting was one way they showed their religious devotion. They knew that God would be pleased with their efforts to get back what they once had...to the time they felt "normal" and blessed.

But what they got from God was a rebuke. That is what our scripture from Isaiah 58 points. "Really? That is what you thought I wanted. Sure, you are fasting but you are still oppressing your workers. You fast but you fight with others. I want a different kind of fasting," God says. "I want a daily fast....a fast from domination, from playing the blame game, from speaking evil of others, from entitlement and blindness to one's own privilege. I want a fast from self-serving individualism and indifference. I want you to daily seek justice through your own generosity, day in and day out. Instead of not eating I want you to break bread with the hungry. Your religious ritual without social action and reform is self-serving. It is empty. You cannot have a full relationship with me without having a just relationship with your neighbors," God says. It is a call to bring our practice into line with our heart and our heart into line with our practice.

The rhythm of Isaiah 58 is an “if-then” pattern. **If** we choose the fast that God calls us to practice...**then** we will experience light, healing, restoration, help and God’s presence. If-then actually shows that we have agency in the process. God doesn’t say, “There is nothing you can do to aid the healing and wholeness of your community. I will either provide it or I won’t.” No. We aren’t just pawns. God wants partnership with us. God wants us to participate in the very restoration of our society. As Isaiah 58 says, **if** we fast from domination and blaming; **if** we care for the vulnerable and oppressed; **if** we use our agency to restore the dignity of the community **then** we become the repairers of the breach; **then** we become restorers of streets worth living on. We don’t want to get back to “normal” because normal wasn’t good...wasn’t whole...wasn’t just. Pope Francis spoke out those words to Catholics throughout the world when on Easter Sunday he called for a “conversion that puts an end to the idolatry of money and places human life and dignity at the center.”

We stand at a pivotal moment in our history. While we deal with a virus with global consequences by staying home we also have the opportunity to combat the viruses of greed and indifference. This apocalyptic moment may awaken in us what we need that will allow us to pivot from returning to life as “normal” to moving forward towards a just future. A pivot that will make us provide the same access to health and economic opportunities to all our citizens; a future in which we consume less and value people more; a future in which we breathe more, rest more, notice more so that the Earth may be restored; a future in which our own individual rights do not crush the health and welfare of our neighbors; a future in which we help repair the breach and restore the streets we live on.

In this time when we are isolated from each other...trying to figure out how to get enough toilet paper to make it through this pandemic; listening to misinformation and untested guesses; tamping down our anxiety about the future; letting go of plans we had for celebrations, trips, life-marking events...it is hard to hold onto hope and figure out how to use our agency to create a new and just reality for all of God’s children.

But when I lose hope...when I feel overwhelmed with the effort to change the world, I remember all of you. I see your faces and I remember that none of us is responding to this God-given call alone. We get to do this together. We do it by each of us offering up what we have. Among us we have dreamers and poets. We have negotiators and thinkers. We have prayers and those who point out the obvious. We have marchers and those who hold onto the hope we need. We have teachers and those who remind us of the vision. We have prophets and those who can discern the Spirit. We have justice seekers and those who do the detail work. We have storytellers and musicians. We have artists and doers. We do not do this alone nor do we have to provide all that is needed. We put our divine given gifts and talents together and with our collective agency we make a difference. We demand a difference. And we make that difference by first starting with ourselves. Answer these questions: What has this apocalyptic moment unveiled for you that will make you change your ways in the hopes of changing the world? How can we use this time of unveiling to work collectively for a new world of justice and peace, equality and joy?

I have found that this time of physical separation has giving me space to rest, think, dream, and understand what truly and honestly matters in my life. I can't tell you how often I think of my church family and relish the beauty and gift of you. I read a Facebook post recently in which someone said, "I have never missed the physical church more than I do right now." As we take this Sabbath time we find how much we need each other...crave the opportunity to be together...how much we find joy and challenge and collective agency in each other.

It truly is when I look at all of you that my hope is renewed...you gorgeous, gifted children of the Living God. Together we can change...we can change the world... together we can repair the breach and restore the streets. Together...