

Isaiah 58: 1-9a “The Fast I Choose” Rev. Janet Chapman 2/22/26

A story is told about a monk from southern France who went to Rome to take in the splendors of the Holy City during the 4th century when gladiators were still popular. He wasn't aware of all that was involved in such entertainment within the Coliseum, but soon realized what was going to happen when the gladiators took their places on the field. They drew their weapons, waved them at Caesar, considered their god, then called out, “We who are about to die salute thee!” The young monk called out amidst the roaring crowd, “Stop! Stop! In the name of Jesus, Stop!” His voice couldn't be heard above the crowd so he rushed down the side to the barrier that separated the cheering crowd from the strutting gladiators and again yelled out, “In the name of Jesus, Stop!” Still, no one noticed him nor heard his plea. He jumped over the barrier and ran out onto the middle of the Coliseum floor and stood between the two gladiators and yelled at both, “In the name of Jesus, Stop!” They ignored his words and instead, each took his sword and ran it through the body of the pleading monk. As the man of God dropped dead to the ground silence fell over the crowd. Then in the stunned stillness, one man in one of the back rows left his seat, came down an aisle of the Coliseum and left. Another followed. Then another, and another, then still another! As the Coliseum emptied, Caesar himself stood and left. Legend has it that from that day forward, there were no more gladiator fights in Rome's Coliseum. Fact or myth, it speaks to an eternal truth – bad religion leads to bad community ethics as well as bad economics and politics.

The prophet Isaiah is addressing some bad religion in chapter 58. By the time the Jewish community arrived at this time period, they were in big trouble. They had been yearning for home for several centuries, having been deported to Babylon and carrying the pain of the walls of Jerusalem being breached and their beloved Temple being destroyed. They missed what had defined their identity for so long, they grieved the loss of the home they once knew and loved. When the Persians finally overtook Babylon, King Cyrus the Second gave the Israelites permission to return home, but what they found was not the dream that had sustained them. It was like the Germans

returning to Berlin after the Second World War – heaps of crumbled stones where Solomon’s Temple once stood, wild animals wandering through the formerly mighty city walls, brambles of weeds growing among the broken masonry between what had once been shops, bakeries, and homes.

Our text today takes place in the third section of Isaiah where the prophet addresses the question in the hearts of all those who had returned: How will we ever pick up the pieces? How will these ruins ever be transformed back into the land we loved so much? With the season of Lent upon us, the prophet challenges us with what is the practice of good versus bad religion. What does it mean to live a true fast in this Lenten season as apparently God’s idea of a fast is very different? Tradition teaches that fasting was designed to remind us that we depend entirely on God and helps us identify with those who lack the necessities and luxuries we enjoy. It doesn’t necessarily have to involve food. The Israelites had been in exile so long, they had forgotten what good and bad examples of fasting were, and beyond that, what it would take to rebuild their city. Religious leadership was guiding them in the wrong direction, making the spiritual discipline of fasting a showy practice rather than authentic worship. They completely misread the situation in which they found themselves and for that reason, their nation was failing. Bad religion was leading to bad economics and politics. They fasted a lot and engaged in highly visible forms of religious activity, but the prophet accuses them saying, “Even the days you are fasting, you serve your own interests and oppress all your workers.” They were being greedy and endlessly clever in the lies they told their public. They knew how to manipulate, exploit, and gain the advantage, all the while trying to maintain this image of noble religion and morality. The problem, in Isaiah’s mind, is obvious: You fast, but you do not see; you humble yourselves, but you do not notice. You are so busy going through the motions that you don’t see underneath the facade what is truly going on. Every action taken by leadership is named as being for the good of the nation; every strategic move is enforced through brute oppression. Those who benefit turn out to be the ones with the most wealth and power. The people are promised lower costs of living but

only see increases and extra fees, they are ensured safety and well-being but only see heightened fear and suspicion. The religious leaders brag about restoring “law and order” while the people experience chaos and discrimination based on who is acceptable and who isn’t. Human dignity and freedom are sacrificed in the name of maintaining religious power and squelching chaos.

The chaotic situation of the Israelites of 530 BCE seems all too familiar to some of us today. The different types of chaos we experience in our world today mirror what we find in the Bible. One form of chaos is revealed in Genesis chapter 1, where God creates the earth out of chaos, bringing order and stability. In that story, we recognize that chaos can spawn transformation for good. Likewise, chaos can turn ugly leading to what has been termed “muzzle velocity,” where people are overwhelmed by so much change, they don’t know where to focus their resistance, giving the repeated assurance that utter havoc is somehow order, and vengeful retribution is somehow justice. Jesus models another type of chaos where he overturns the tables in the temple, invites seedy characters to sit at the same table with him, breaks legalistic rules that hinder human flourishing, and takes on the religious leaders and status quo in favor of justice and human dignity.

With the onset of 2026, we have experienced chaos with both good and bad outcomes. Our leadership democracy is dysfunctional, the church struggles to practice fasting from oppression and injustice, and with all this, preacher George Coley directs our attention to the unexpected arrival, hold onto your seats ...of the Muppets Show back on TV... the Muppets who depict a whole different kind of chaos. It’s been 45 years since The Muppet Show was officially on TV but despite all the time that has passed, something about them feels just as relevant today as it did decades ago. Part of that comes from the Muppets’ affectionate relationship with chaos and their ability to take chaos and turn it on its head. As a wacky and wild community of oddballs, they come together to make something beautiful and joyful – even in the midst of their frenzied fumbles – giving us a picture of what our human community can be, despite our faults.

As disrespectful as it might seem, a slapstick variety show about singing puppets gives us insight into the concepts of order and chaos, and ultimately into good and bad religion. Some folks have even written tongue-in-cheek theories of “Chaos Muppets” and “Order Muppets,” which once you see it, you can’t unsee it. Kermit, Scooter, Sam Eagle, and Rowlf are obviously Order Muppets. Animal, Gonzo, Miss Piggy, and the Swedish Chef are clearly Chaos Muppets. The interaction of these two polar opposites is at the heart of The Muppet Show, causing frequent stress for our everyman (or everyfrog) Kermit, and others who just wish the show would go the way it’s supposed to go. However, what would the show be if everything were to go exactly as planned? What we learn to love about these characters is not that they do everything perfectly, or even very well, but that they persist through the absurdity and clash of differences enough to take a bow at the end. This big old dysfunctional family of chickens, rats, pigs and frogs pull off something special yet again by the seat of their pants, despite every jeer and ridicule from the theatre critics Statler and Waldorf. Somehow these characters find delight and laughter, befriending the chaos, and we all benefit. Somehow they show us how to practice a Lenten fast from fear, injustice, greed, and cynicism – the kind of fast I believe God would choose for us if we took the time to pay attention a little closer to the prophet Isaiah.

We do live in chaotic times, and much of our chaos is not near as endearing or wholesome as Gonzo the Great launching himself out of a cannon. But the Muppets have taught me that the proper reaction to chaos is not callousness, apathy, fear, or the oppressive enforcement of some kind of fake normal. The only thing that can truly redeem chaos is joy, relationship, and utter resolve, as Kermit would say, that the show, that is, the creation of beautiful things together, must go on. Choose God’s fast, not hiding yourself from your own kin, but working to end the lock that poverty and despair have on the exploited. Director Ron Howard, speaking of The Muppets Show Creator Jim Henson’s greatest gift, said, “Jim has the ability to be satirical but not cynical. He was able to, with great affection, say ‘Look how silly we can all be. Look how crazy the world can be.’ And yet not turn that into something bleak, but to recognize joy that rises amidst the chaos.” May we choose the fast which brings joy amidst the chaos. Amen.