

ALL WE NEED: THE BASICS

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PREACHERS' NOTES

ASH WEDNESDAY

March 5, 2025

Our Own and Others' Needs

Justin Kosec

REVISED COMMON LECTINARY TEXTS

First Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm: 51:1-17

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

NOTE ABOUT THE LECTINARY

On Ash Wednesday, the Revised Common Lectionary provides two options for readings from the Hebrew Bible: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 and Isaiah 58:1-12. This commentary focuses on the text from Isaiah. Thus, Isaiah 58:1-12 is recommended for use as today's Hebrew Bible reading.

At some point during report card season in my elementary education, I heard a classmate say he was excited about his good grades because they meant he would receive a prize from his parents.

A prize? For good grades? This was something my family had never done. Did my parents not know about Good Grade Prizes? I asked when I got home, because I had to know.

“Mom, I got good grades this quarter.”

“Great, honey!”

“Can I get a prize?”

“For what?”

“For... the good grades.”

“Why would you get a prize for good grades?”

I flubbed my way through some kind of response about so-and-so's Good Grade Prize, knowing full well my mom would tell me that we didn't do things that way in our house. Then she patiently explained that we didn't get a prize for doing what we were supposed to do. We were supposed to go to school and try our hardest. That's what I had done, and the grade was the result.

This was a sensible, if unsatisfying, answer. I knew the grade was the objective. But it wasn't enough. I wanted recognition for what I had done, some external validation.

Prayer is different from a grade, but it's easy to forget. Grades are individual, a recognition of one's own performance. We often treat prayer the same way. This individualist streak is part of Jesus' critique when he criticizes prayer practices in Matthew 6. People want their devotion to be recognized. We want to receive praise for the time and effort we have put into prayer—we want a Good Prayer Prize. Our desire for such validation betrays the individualism behind our prayers. We may find ourselves seeking recognition even when we pray for others.

Certainly, many people turn to prayer to ask God to fulfill their basic or most urgent needs. This doesn't mean that such prayers are selfish, but prayers remain individualistic whenever they focus only on our own needs. In Isaiah 58, the prophet presses readers to recognize something provocative: often, when we pray for ourselves—for our own wants, our own desires, our own recognition, even our own basic necessities—it becomes quite easy to forget that there are plenty of people around us who don't have what they need to survive.

In Isaiah, the prophet identifies something interesting: God will rush to care for all of our needs when we "share bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isaiah 58:7). The prophet does not minimize our needs. Instead, as the prophet writes, God fully recognizes our needs, and God will satisfy those needs when we broaden our awareness to include our neighbors' needs as well.

This season, you can begin by recognizing basic human needs that you and all other humans possess. We all need to breathe. We all need to drink water. We all need food. We all need human companionship. We all need shelter of some kind. We need plenty of other things besides. Feel free to explore some of those things in your context as you set the stage for a season in which you'll focus on needs. Remind your worshiping community that society's focus on individualism hides the truth revealed in the scripture: anything *you* truly need is something your neighbor needs as well. God is not satisfied until everyone has what they need. Nobody gets a Good Prayer Prize until everyone is fed to satisfaction.

As preachers, you may already know and recognize all this in your own spiritual lives. Today, you may find it useful to press your people to ponder how often they pray for their own desires versus the pressing needs of their neighbors. Remember, however, that in Isaiah, the prophet doesn't critique an individual but rather a whole society. You may also find yourself considering the

concerns of your congregation as a whole. What concerns press closest to their hearts? As a community, how often does their prayer life narrow to focus solely on the needs of your own congregation? How often does the congregation's awareness expand to include the needs of neighbors, and how narrow or broad is their definition of neighbor? Is that concept as broad as Jesus'—broad enough to include people we do not know, people we try to avoid, or even our enemies?

When I worked for the chapel at my divinity school, our staff often needed someone to remind us of this tension. We prayed every day, and our prayers were heartfelt pleas for our community. But once in a while, a staff member would ask, “When was the last time we prayed for the challenges our city faces?” Often, we could not remember. We were so wrapped up in the rhythm of school, the stresses of the academic year, and the pressures of life in an academic community that we had forgotten to pray for people down the road who struggled for their daily bread.

That doesn't make personal struggles less real or less potent. But consider your own community. How many in your community are more likely to identify with anxiety over midterms than with putting dinner on the table? If your congregation is more likely to identify with the former, how do you help them expand their awareness? If they already demonstrate a keen attention to their neighbors, do they hope to receive a Good Prayer Prize? How, if at all, does an awareness of the neighbor shape their spiritual practices?

We can find our favorite Lenten practices utterly transformed by an awareness of our neighbors' needs. When we fast from food, for instance, we get hungry or desire what we are not eating. As a consequence, we find ourselves grappling with a number of issues. We feel the pressure of our human need for calories, that bodily necessity that all of us share. Yet fasting also disrupts our eating habits and the rhythm of our days. It highlights the nature of desires that otherwise go unrecognized, like our love for a particular type of food. We might even encounter personal tendencies toward overconsumption or overindulgence.

When applied safely, any of these outcomes make fasting worthwhile. But if we broaden our awareness to include the needs of our neighbors, the practice of fasting transforms. We discover that when we eat less, spend less, and waste less, we have much more to share with others. Then, we begin to wonder: if we decide to fast from eating meat on Fridays, for example, how can we share with others what we would have consumed on our own?

It's not necessary to use your Ash Wednesday preaching to introduce the whole menu of needs to be explored over the course of this season. Instead, you may want to follow the prophet's inclination in Isaiah. The only needs mentioned in today's scripture are the needs of the afflicted—the needs of someone else who's having a worse day than you. This is the best way to set the stage for a season focused on need: to begin by broadening our awareness to consider how our own needs are intrinsically connected to the needs of our neighbors and of our whole society.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Which Lenten practices do people follow in your worshiping community, and how might these practices be transformed by a broader awareness of your neighbors' needs?
- In which part of your spiritual life do you find yourself pursuing a Good Prayer Prize?
- How often do your prayers—both your personal prayers and the prayers of your congregation—include an awareness of your neighbors' needs? If such awareness is a regular feature of your prayer, how can you expand your awareness to pray for neighbors you have ignored or forgotten?
- Who in your local community prays for basic necessities today? How does your congregation help provide for them?

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE STARTERS

ASH WEDNESDAY

March 5, 2025

This week's need

To think about what other people need

Discussing this week's need with children

Paradoxically, kids are both wonderful and terrible at this need. On the one hand, kids can be some of the most empathetic people we know, keenly aware of the needs of the world and genuinely upset when not enough is done to meet them. But empathy, the ability to imagine oneself in someone else's position, is not an innate skill; it's one that we learn with age. One article on childhood development illustrates the paradox well, noting, "By the time a child is about 4 years old, he begins to associate his emotions with the feelings of others. While one child says he has a stomachache, some 4-year-olds may come over and comfort him. Others, much to the bewilderment and horror of parents and teachers, will walk over to the child and punch him in the stomach."¹

Nevertheless, being able to imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes is a life skill that we all need, not just because punching others is not the way to make friends and influence people, but because we're God's people, and God calls us to a special kind of caring for the poor, the unhoused, the imprisoned, and the oppressed. Ash Wednesday is an especially good day to explore that need with the children of your congregation.

Visual aid

A very large basket, on the scale of a laundry basket

Scripture focus

This week's reading from Isaiah calls God's people to do the work of justice by meeting the real needs of others: "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke... to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them." (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Meeting the need

****This activity requires prep work!****

¹ Kutner, Lawrence. "When (and How) Do Children Develop Empathy?" Psych Central, May 17, 2016. <https://psychcentral.com/lib/how-children-develop-empathy/#1>.

Option 1

A few weeks ahead of Ash Wednesday, prepare children and their families to bring in a non-perishable food or clothing donation, or something else that supports a ministry in which your church is already engaged. Be specific in what you request! You can collect these items before Lent begins or simply continue the collection all season if you don't anticipate strong participation from families on Ash Wednesday.

Collect the donations in the large basket. Bring it out and place it in front of the children. Tell them that it's being filled with things for people in your community who don't have what they need to get by. Please note: this will not be a surprise to most of your children, and unbeknownst to you, some may be recipients of such donations.

As you introduce the scripture focus for the day, tell them that God asks us to take special care of those who don't have what they need. Invite the kids to put what they brought that evening into the basket, or to check out what is already there.

Option 2

Turn the same message into a congregation-wide donation drive. Instead of having the children and their families fill the basket alone, have them help you collect items from the whole congregation.

WEEKLY LITURGY

VICTORIA LARSON

GATHERING WORDS

OPTION 1

This variation may be used for any or all weeks of Lent.

As the Holy Spirit gathers us for worship on this ____ Sunday in Lent,
we come carrying the weight of the world's needs.

I invite you to lay those needs in God's hands.
Come back to one simple need:
the need to breathe.

Breathe in, and breathe out,
remembering that in the beginning,
God breathed into us the breath of life.

Breathe in, and breathe out,
remembering that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit
onto his friends and followers.

Breathe in, and breathe out,
remembering that the Holy Spirit intercedes
for our needs and for every need
with sighs too deep for words.

We worship in the name of our triune God,
who gives us life,
gives us breath,
and gives us what we need the most:
God's own self,
here in this place.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE DAY

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Tender God, you emptied yourself of power in order to take on flesh in Jesus Christ. Open us to embrace our own vulnerability, so that we may discover how your strength is made perfect in weakness. Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Incandescent Christ, signs of your presence fill the world with brightness, but we are weighed down with sleep. Guide our waking and guard our sleeping, so that we may rest soundly in dreams of the world you envision, and wake to refract your glory in all that we do. Amen.

PALM AND PASSION SUNDAY

Holy Jesus, you sent your disciples to ask for a colt with no reason other than that you needed it. Increase in us the willingness to go where you send us, even when we don't understand the needs you call us to answer or the value of what we can offer. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

A note for worship planners: *The Prayers of the People are one of the most important worship elements in this series: it's when we pray for what we need. During this season, we strongly encourage you or a member of your worshiping community to prepare your own prayers each week. Below, you'll find a set of questions for each week meant to help you think broadly about needs from local to global through the lens of each week's theme. Each question could generate several prayer petitions; use your best judgment about the prayers your community is called to pray. Strive for balance between intercessions on behalf of your church community and your local, national, and global communities. Remember to pray for creation and for the poor. Although we don't include the prompts below, it's common in many traditions to give thanks for the lives of those who have died before concluding these prayers.*

ASH WEDNESDAY

In today's readings, the prophet Isaiah calls our attention to the needs of the afflicted. In your prayers, intercede for the "parched places" (Isaiah 58:11) throughout your community and the world. Usually, our prayers include our own community and ministries; today, make an intentional choice to focus your prayers on those outside your community.

- Which parts of the wider church are struggling? Think of local ministry partners, international sibling congregations or judicatories, and the church in places where freedom of worship is not permitted.
- Where is creation crying out for help?
- Which authorities (local, national, and/or abroad) are struggling to inaugurate or preserve peace and justice?

- Who is suffering today in body, mind, or spirit?
- Who in your church's sphere of influence needs food, clothing, shelter, community?

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

In today's readings, a vineyard worker advocates on behalf of a barren fig tree to a vineyard owner who wants to cut it down. In your prayers, pray for those who need an advocate or a guide to help them survive and thrive. Pay special attention to the work of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate that Jesus provides for us.

- Which parts of the wider church are facing theological division?
- Where in your neighborhood are trees and vegetation at risk of being cut down? Where is the wellbeing of animals or habitats cut short?
- Where are war and conflict breaking out in the world and in your community?
- Who needs legal representation that they cannot afford?
- Who needs help in order to ease their body, mind, or spirit?
- Which ministries in your congregation are in special need of the Holy Spirit's guidance or intercession on their behalf?

BLESSING

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Now may God,
 who brings the wilderness into blossom,
 who basks in the fragrance of extravagant love,
 who blesses those in mourning with a promise of joy,
 bless you and sustain you.

Today God has answered your need,
 and now the Spirit sends you out
 to answer the world's need. Amen.

PALM AND PASSION SUNDAY

Now may God,
 who makes a way in the wilderness,
 who walks the path to the cross,
 who passes into our very hearts,
 bless you and sustain you.

Today God has answered your need,
 and now the Spirit sends you out
 to answer the world's need. Amen.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT: THE NEED FOR CHANGE

In the Bulb There Is a Flower (Hymn of Promise)

Text: Natalie Sleeth

Music: PROMISE, Natalie Sleeth

Can You Feel the Seasons Turning

Text: Mary Louise Bringle

Music: LLANSANNAN, Welsh melody

As the Winter Days Grow Longer

Text: Mary Louise Bringle

Music: SUO GÂN, Welsh melody

God of Change and Glory

Text: Alvin Allison Carmines

Music: KATHERINE, Alvin Allison Carmines

Change My Heart, O God

Text: Eddie Espinosa

Music: CHANGE MY HEART, Eddie Espinosa