

I want to take this time to acknowledge a very important season that is almost upon us. Yes, it is time that I wish you all a very happy, almost football season. And I know, cue some eye rolls from some of you, cue some “Skols” from some of you, cue some ambivalence from some of you. But to those who celebrate, happy football season.

Now what this means for my family is a couple of things. It means a perpetual feeling of dread anytime the Bills play because my brother-in-law’s about as die hard as they come when it comes to the Bills Mafia. It means my mom is ready for another season of cheering for the Chiefs because she is quietly a Swiftie and loves herself some Travis Kelce. It means that Jennifer and I will live in constant nerves because it doesn’t matter if the Lions are good, we’re too used to the Lions being the Lions. And ultimately and most importantly for my crew, it means it is time for fantasy football season.

We’ve been playing close to ten years together and it has created some on-going inside jokes and unspoken rules. One should immediately start praying for whichever quarterback Jennifer drafts, because he will immediately get hurt, and like season-ending kind of hurt. When he was still playing, my dad’s wife would automatically take Tom Brady first, no matter what. And then we get into the no-no list...the list of players that we all

usually just refuse to draft out of principle or annoyance. Last year was Felix's first year playing with us and this child drafted *all* of those people and then won, so ya know, all's fair in love, morals, and fantasy football I suppose. But it happens like this every year. When it's time to make our choices for who is going to fill out our rosters, there are always those people that you're like but they're so good...but noooooo...

There was the year that the girls heckled me for drafting Adrian Peterson the year after he was arrested. It was a bad call, I'll own that now. We did in fact give Felix grief last year for drafting Aaron Rodgers, because have fun with the crazy. Just out of basic meh, none of us like drafting anyone from the Cowboys, for me, I try to avoid the Packers as much as I can. Jon will never draft a Patriot. We all have to make our choices, but you can always tell when one of us is on the brink of making a decision we hate. You'll see the draft timer just ticking down and down and down and you know that someone is over there like, I hate this guy, *but* he'll help me. But I hate this guy, *but he's so good*. If it's Jon, he will never cave, he will find the next guy. If it's me, I usually pick them and then judge myself. We all have our strategies, but at some point, every year, each of us comes face to face with that decision, do I take this guy or just move it along because I know what's in my football loving heart?

Isaiah isn't exactly laying out technicalities for fantasy football this morning, but he is laying the groundwork for how God's people go about making choices. We're near the end of Isaiah so we're dealing with a post-exile people. This is the generation that was either *born* in exile or were extremely young going into it. Most of them don't really know what life at home looked like *before* the exile. They have probably heard stories, but every story comes with a slant, so essentially they're starting fresh, starting new, getting a reboot on their relationship with God as they return home.

Now, of course, in the word of fresh starts, you just want to assume that everything is starting off peachy keen, everything is perfect, and while they might be starting off on the right foot, the job of the prophet is to also *keep* them on the right feet. So even though they have just come through this awful ordeal of exile and return, Isaiah wants to make sure that he is grounding God's people in right relationship, but that relationship comes with a stark reminder. While they might think that it's just about them and God on a one to one level, Isaiah is there to remind them that that relationship actually heavily, *heavily* relies on their relationships with each other, particularly with their neighbors who are in need. How they choose God actually comes down to how they choose each other, which isn't as easy or as nice of a message to hear as just go out and choose God.

Isaiah isn't harsh in his message, but he's honest; he's honest about what a genuine life with God looks like. He wants this returned community to work, to be filled with hope and love and profound faith, but he needs them to see how they go about doing that. Because it seems that in their reflection and return from exile, their focus is on worship, which on the face of it, isn't a bad thing. They have honed in on the Sabbath as though this can be the thing that maintains and creates their relationship with God, but Isaiah just doesn't have time for this because even this thing they're focusing on, they're focusing on in all the wrong ways.

They're observing the Sabbath in name only, worshipping, praying, going through the motions of observance, but then are also using the day to do their own thing. Look I'm resting! But also just doing the things that are good for me, and not truly centering and focusing on my faith. They think that this one thing is going to be what puts them into right relationship with God, because let's be real, that's the easy route. Yes, I can take one day and focus on God, but by doing that, they're missing the entire first part of what Isaiah talks about because *that* is where their relationship with God lies.

In the wide world of asking the question, how do we choose God, the answer for Isaiah is not by observing the Sabbath, the answer is, by choosing others. How do they enter into right relationship with God? By removing

the yoke of oppression from amongst themselves, by removing blame and hate speech, by not just giving food to the hungry, but the better translation is, by pouring one's self out for those in need, not just *a* hungry person, but *the* hungry, those who hunger for food, for safety, for health, for peace, for community. Those actions are what are going to lead to their light shining in the darkness, to feeling God's presence amongst them. Those actions are going to make observing the Sabbath a joy, because they will have all of these ways of serving God's children to reflect on when it comes time to pray and worship. In the divine draft of life, it actually isn't about choosing God number one overall and saying to heck with everything else. It's about choosing our neighbors first, and letting our relationship with God flow from *that* choice, because by loving God's children, we love God.

It *seems* like an easy message, but it's about the furthest thing from an easy message because frankly it's not what we want to hear. I don't want to hear that my best route to a fantasy football championship is drafting *the best available player* even if I don't like them, I want to draft the team I want and win regardless. We don't want to hear that our relationship with God is in no small part determined by our relationships with one another, because if that's the case...yikes...for all of us. We want it to be as simple as keeping the Sabbath, especially if keeping the Sabbath looks like rolling

into church, saying the right words, standing up and sitting down when we're supposed to and then heading back out into the world to do whatever we want with our God gold star for the day. But that is nowhere near what Isaiah is saying...

Isaiah is saying that it isn't enough to just choose God and call it a day. Translated into the 21st century, it isn't enough to just say we're Christian and call it a day. For Isaiah, the message to God's people is this: to choose God, you have to choose each other. You have to choose to let go of oppression and blame and speaking without compassion and actively choose to give of yourself to your neighbor, *that* is how we choose God. God isn't looking for empty, hollow worship that actually doesn't translate into our lives outside of this building. God is looking for how what we do here compels us out there to do more, to be more for our neighbor, and more often than not that is just not the kind of faith that we signed up for, because it's not easy, it's not mindless; it's active and it takes sacrifice, a giving of ourselves and we're just not particularly interested in that kind of living.

Imagine being the ancient Israelites who have just come back from Babylon where they have lived under oppression, knowing their people were sent there because of the oppression and ignoring of God that they did, and then imagine coming home and thinking you can just do the same thing over

again and expect something different, that suddenly God is going to be down with all the things that led to the exile in the first place. We hear that and are like, wow, someone wasn't paying attention. But...imagine being God's children who have been given grace upon grace, who have been forgiven beyond measure who then go out into the world and spew hate and judgment and ridicule, who withhold forgiveness like its got limited availability.

Imagine being a people who know that Jesus said that the new commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself and then go out into the world and find all the reasons why *those* people aren't your neighbor.

Imagine finding excuses not to love. Imagine thinking an hour a week is enough. Imagine finding all the justifications for why hate is ok and oppression is just part of the world we live in. Suddenly, judging Isaiah's audience doesn't seem so fun...

Over and over and over again God has chosen us, called us beloved, and shown us grace, grace beyond anything we ever could have deserved, and over and over and over again we take advantage and expound all the ways others have to earn those things all the while knowing we didn't earn it at all. We want to choose God, we want to show up for God, we wouldn't be here if we didn't, but the choice isn't about what happens here in these pews, the choice happens...once we leave. **AMEN!!!**