

Inside Out
[Isaiah 58:1-12](#)
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A few months ago I was driving home from a worship service I'd led out in Langley, and after coming through the Massey Tunnel I was trying to get off Highway 99 onto Steveston Highway, on the interchange where you are supposed to do a zipper merge – two lanes of traffic merge into one, one car from each lane at a time. And I thought I was following the rules – it clearly seemed to be my turn to go, so I went, but the car directly behind me clearly had a different interpretation of how a zipper works, because she started laying on her horn and flashing her lights at me, and when we both got onto Steveston Highway she pulled up beside me at the light, rolled down her window, and started screaming at me. And remember, I am on my way home from leading worship, so I am wearing my clerical collar – I'm clearly a Christian minister, so I wanted to be very, very careful about how I responded, because I knew that whatever I did or said in reply, it would have to be compatible with the way I was dressed. Most of the time, Christians don't have any external markers that tell the world who we are and what we believe – we don't wear turbans or hijabs, clothing or jewelry or a particular style of hair or beard that identifies as particularly Christian. Some people wear a cross around their neck or stick a Jesus fish on their car, but not everyone knows what those mean, and they're optional. Life gets a bit more complicated when your outward appearance

reveals your inner beliefs, and then there's a lot more pressure to make sure that what you believe and what you do actually lines up, because if they don't, people will know.

That's the problem the prophet Isaiah is addressing in the passage we read this morning. The people of Jerusalem love to make big, public displays of their love for God, their holiness and piety. They fast, they humble themselves, they sacrifice, they make a big display of covering themselves in sackcloth and ashes, and then they expect that God will reward these big displays of piety and repentance with blessings, abundance, renewal. But it doesn't work, because all that fasting and sackcloth and ashes, it's all just for show. While they're carrying out these rituals, they're cheating their own employees, serving their own interests, stirring up division and conflict in their community, allowing the hungry and homeless to suffer on the streets while they go home from their public rituals to their private mansions. That kind of hypocrisy – this vast gulf between the public perception and the private actions – that isn't what God wants from these people. God wants these public displays of repentance to mean something real, to be a real reflection of who they actually are, not just routine, not just performance, but truth. The rituals only matter if they are coming from people who are actually allowing that repentance to shape their daily lives, people who loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, break each and every yoke that holds people in bondage, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and provide a home for the homeless poor. That's the kind of faith God is

calling the people to offer – faith where what is outside matches what is inside. Faith that is consistent, all the way through.

And that's the kind of faith we are called to make real here, in our own lives. Here today, we will perform our own ritual of repentance – each of you will come forward, and I will place ashes on your forehead, or on your right hand, as a reminder of who you are – Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. This is a lesson in humility – to remember that we are not the centre of the universe, we are not quite as important as we usually think we are. And we want that reminder to be a public reminder, a visible revelation of who we are and what we believe, so that everyone who we see today as we go about our work, our school, our daily living, everyone will see who we are and what we believe. We take the ashes on as a sign to the world and to ourselves of who we are, and who we know God wants us to be, and we commit ourselves to making those two realities, who we are, and who God wants us to be, closer and closer to being one and the same, each and every day as we journey through Lent towards the cross. From this moment on, we are committed to making our outer actions and our inner faith align, closer and closer, to the actions and faith of our saviour, Jesus Christ. As we walk towards the cross, may we walk with integrity, with purpose, with humility, with love, so the world will see what we believe in what we do. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!