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“I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt 12:8).

Isa 38:1-6, 221-22; 39:7-8; Matt 12:1-8

The story of Hezekiah’s brush with death in Isaiah 38 is filled with vivid detail and a surprise twist. First, the prophet tells the king that he is going to die from an illness caused by a boil. Hezekiah turns his face to the wall and prays, weeping bitterly. So, God changes his mind and sends Isaiah to tell the king that he will survive. Not only this, God will add 15 years to his life and save the city from the Assyrians as well. The sign that this will happen is that the shadow cast by the sun on the terrace will retreat 10 steps.

Exegetes note that Hezekiah was both faithful and unfaithful as king, and the hesitations and reversals by God in the story are actually signs of his own uneven performance. The story survives as an example of God’s mercy, which ties it to today’s Gospel in which Jesus tries to get his legalist critics to realize that God wants mercy, not sacrifice. His hungry disciples did no more than David’s men or the priests on duty in the temple when they gleaned grain from the fields because they were hungry.

The Scriptures invite us into a world rich with symbols and parables that stir our imaginations over deep questions about how to be faithful and just what God is like. Jesus was on the side of human need in his quarrel with the scribes and Pharisees, who insisted that the Sabbath rule was more important than hunger. These zealous and self-righteous teachers made God out to be as demanding as they were. Religion is presented as rule-keeping and sacrifice to please an angry judge instead of the relationship of love with a caring *Abba*.

The scene in Isaiah also shows us a mercurial God ready to take a life, then, moved by prayer and tears, restoring it and a whole nation signaled by a cosmic miracle of the sun reversing its course. We are immersed in an ancient world of negotiation and magical signs. Ten steps back, 15 more years, almost like a child’s game, as the story took on folkloric stature.

Jesus had much to contend with in order to rescue the God of mercy from both legalism and magical thinking. God is always merciful. Prayer is not negotiation, quid pro quo or magic; it is an intimate relationship with One who loves us and always wants us to be healed, fed and forgiven. This is the real scandal Jesus is trying to

teach, that God is unconditional love, undeserved mercy and compassion. Nothing we do can make God loves us more or less than total love. This is who God is.

As a postscript to Isaiah, what would you do with an extra 15 years added to your life?

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