

Love Train

February 8, 2026

In 2006, South African scholar of preaching Johan Cilliers published a devastating study. The title alone stops you in your tracks: *God For Us?* Cilliers analyzed sermons preached in the Dutch Reformed Church during the years of apartheid and asked a terrifyingly important question: What kind of preaching allows racial supremacy, division, animus, and violence to continue? Not what kind of preaching *opposes* injustice. But what kind quietly **permits it**. What kind of worship *de-forms* rather than *re-forms*.

And what he discovered was not that these churches lacked religion. They were full of it. They prayed. They fasted. They sang hymns. They quoted scripture.

What they lacked was a faith that, rather than disrupting unjust systems, instead blessed them. Which makes Isaiah 58 feel less like an ancient text and more like a mirror held uncomfortably close to our own faces.

“Shout out, do not hold back,” God says. “Tell my people of their rebellion.”

God says this, not because the people stopped worshipping, but because their worship had become a substitute for justice rather than a source of it.

The people asked God, *Why don't you notice how faithful we are?*

And God replies, *Because while you're fasting, you're still exploiting workers. While you're praying, you're still quarreling. While you're bowing your heads, you're stepping over hungry bodies.*

And then comes that unmistakable line—so clear a child could understand it: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”

This is not poetic metaphor. This is policy. This is practice. This is embodied faith. Feed the hungry. House the homeless. Clothe the naked. Do not turn away from the flesh and blood needs in your midst.

Isaiah does not ask how sincere your spirituality feels. Isaiah asks who is freer because you showed up. And then—only then—*then*—“Your light shall break forth like the dawn.”

Not before justice. After.

Which brings us to Jesus, standing on a hillside, looking at a crowd full of ordinary people and saying something astonishing: “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”

Not *try to be*. Not *someday*. **You are.**

Salt doesn't exist for itself. It seasons. It preserves. It conducts energy. It purifies. It keeps things from rotting.

Light doesn't exist for itself. It reveals. It guides. It also purifies. It helps others see.

And Jesus says: *This is who you are for the world.* But then he adds a warning. Salt can lose its taste. Light can be hidden. Faith can become useless—not because it isn't religious enough, but because it has stopped being for others.

When I was five years old, I had a Disney record—some of you remember those—telling the story of Johnny Appleseed, you know, the American folk hero who planted apple trees across the upper Midwest. At one point, his community decides to move west, and they sing to Johnny:

*“Get on the wagon train with us,
off to the great unknown.
Get on the wagon train with us,
or you'll be left alone...”*

And the song fades out, hauntingly:

*“Or you'll be left alone...
or you'll be left alone...”*

That refrain echoes when I read Isaiah. It echoes when I hear Jesus say, *I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it.* Get on the train of justice. Get on the train of mercy. Get on the train of compassion that builds systems where people can breathe. Not because God is threatening abandonment—but because love is going somewhere, and refusing to be a part of that movement has consequences.

Anne Lamott tells a story about a sparrow lying on its back in the street, legs up in the air, trying to hold back the darkness. A warhorse laughs and asks what good that could possibly do.

The sparrow replies, “One does what one can.”

Isaiah is not asking us to save the world alone. Jesus is not demanding perfection. They are asking us to show up where we are, with what we have, and align our lives with the direction of God's justice. Salt that still tastes. Light that still glows.

And here's the paradox: Joy is not the reward for justice—it is the **fuel**. Joy is subversive. Gratitude is dangerous. Rest is holy.

Sometimes holding back the darkness looks like marching. Sometimes it looks like feeding people. Sometimes it looks like making phone calls, staffing polls, protecting neighbors. And sometimes it looks like keeping the patient comfortable—hot tea, warm baths, binge-watching a show—because exhausted people do not build liberated worlds.

Isaiah ends with one of the most beautiful promises in scripture: “You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” Not the destroyer. Not the judge. The repairer.

Beloved, this is not a call to frantic activism. It is a call to integrated faith—where worship shapes how we treat bodies, budgets, borders, and bread. Where prayer opens our hands instead of closing our eyes. Where our faith is not merely performative but effective.

You are the salt of the earth. Don’t lose your saltiness. You are the light of the world. Don’t hide your glow.

Get on the train—not because you’re afraid of being left behind, but because this is where love is going. And one does what one can.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20
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