

Isaiah 55: 1-9 & Luke 13: 1-9 The Mercy That Waits

Isaiah 55:

1 Hear, everyone who thirsts; come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price.

2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your earnings for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

5 Now you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

6 Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;

7 let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The beauty of the sanctuary in a church, any church but especially in this church, in any given Sunday morning, like this morning, is the diversity among the people who fill it, the great variety among us here. Defined by these walls erected more than 140 years ago, this sacred space has welcomed those who were cradle Presbyterians as well as those who had never heard of Presbyterians before, and visitors from a neighboring city or a state, even a few this morning from across the ocean from another land. We have some who boldly profess “I’m a joiner!” while others are sure they’re not (and that’s all good). There are retired clergies who have dedicated the “best years of their lives” to advancing the reign of God here on earth, although with God, I believe, the best is always yet to come. And there are the seekers of wisdom, of any strand or school, and those who are simply curious. Some of us call God Heavenly Father, others the Lord Jesus, still others the higher power, or the Spirit. This is God’s house and in the name of Jesus Christ who have made God’s love visible for us, each one of us are welcome here, just as we are.

And, with all our glorious diversity, when we gather to listen to the Scripture, the Word of God finds us as the people of God. The words of the Scripture are as much for those who heard them thousands of years ago, in a land far away, as they are for us here today.

In the passage Pastor Trey just read to us, God is talking through the prophet Isaiah to God’s people Israel, living in captivity in a foreign land under an unsympathetic leader. Stripped of their

identity as a people and under the control of a ruler who did not care about them, life was hard and uncertain. God sees them, lost and struggling to survive, their livelihood threatened.

Moved by compassion, as all God's moves are, God calls out to get their attention, Hey! Come to the waters, I know you're thirsty. God not only offers wine and milk, what they need and desire, but also takes care to remove obstacles that prevent them from having it, like the lack of money. "No money? No problem. You don't have what it takes to get what you need? I give it to you anyways," God says, "because I want you to live." God is like that, huh? Covering for us, making up for where we lack. "You don't need money to feed on the rich, nourishing goodness I give you, but you need to listen, and carefully," says God. You 'pay attention' to what God says, not money, and you will live.

And what God said was this. To David, Israel's beloved king of all-time, God had promised God's enduring, steadfast love and gave him a vocation, a purpose in life, which was for him to be the witness to all his peoples of the glory of his God, to show his people who their God was. Now, God makes an eternal covenant with the uprooted people of God, and now they are to be God's witnesses not just to their own peoples but to the nations of the world, even the ones they didn't know. God sustained their lives not only by giving them what they needed and desired, but also by giving their lives a meaning and a purpose, to witnessing to the world who this God was.

This is our God, who, moved by compassion, expands the reach of divine compassion to those who do not know God and the way of God. God's mercy expands to a surprising degree. We hear a voice call out, "Seek the LORD while the Lord may be found; call upon God while God is near." He is apparently calling out to those who are not seeking God nor calling upon the Lord, which could be any of us, at least some of the time.

And that's not all; the voice continues, "**Let the wicked** forsake their way and **the unrighteous** their thoughts; *let them* return to the LORD, that the Lord may have *mercy on them*, and to our God, for God will abundantly pardon." The voice urges all to turn to God, but here especially, the voice says to "let the wicked to forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts." "Let them return to the Lord, that God may have mercy of them and abundantly forgive them."

If a person is referred to as the wicked, it is unlikely this wicked individual would voluntarily "forsake their way." We come to think of someone as "wicked" not because of one thing the person did but this person is consistent in doing things that are harmful and destructive and evil. So, what's behind the prophet's utterance "Let them return to the Lord." It sounds like a prayer to me. It may be a

hopeless thing to expect this wicked person to suddenly repent and turn to God, but hopelessness comes when there is a thing to be hoped for, and that hoping for is a prayer.

If we are to follow where this voice leads, we are to hope for the wicked and the unrighteous to return to God so God can forgive them, not as a wishful thinking but as an ardent prayer. God is like that, huh? We have heard, the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting, and we like that. We have heard, God has a preferential option for the poor and we are grateful. And here, God, full of mercy, sends the prophet to call out to the wicked and the unrighteous. How does that sit with you? The divine compassion moves to gather under her lovingly protective wings even those who are outright wicked and unrighteous, so they can be forgiven, so they can have life, and the life abundant, with water, wine and milk.

Now, call to mind a person whom you would describe as “wicked,” someone the world would be a better place without. Now, instead of wishing that the Lord takes him home, imagine yourself praying “Let this person forsake her wicked ways and abandon his unrighteous thoughts, so God may forgive them.” Is that a compassion too wide? We have an uncomfortably merciful God. And our calling is to bear witness to the glory of this God, to live our lives that reflect such divine love and mercy.

And that’s God, whom Jesus calls Abba. Let’s listen to how Jesus bears witness to God. Hear now the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Luke, in Chapter 13, Luke 13: 1-9

13At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’ 6 Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” 8He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’

The strangeness of the incidents might throw us off, but Jesus is responding people reacting to recent events in their first century Jewish life, under the oppressive Roman rule. A writer and a historian of Christianity Diana Butler Bass describes the first incident this way: “Pilate had Galilean pilgrims killed in the Temple courtyard, and their blood mixed with ritual sacrificial blood there, a shocking defilement of both these particular Jews and the Temple itself.” The murderous act by Pilate must have

made the blood of those Jews who heard this news boil; what a horrible end they had to meet. Jesus could hear them questioning, in their heart if not voiced: What could they have done to deserve this? And perhaps wanting Jesus to give a reason, an explanation, that makes the incident feel less horrible, make them feel more in control.

But Jesus rejects the very way of their thinking that, suffering is a punishment for sin. To make this point, Jesus himself brings up a recent accident that killed 18 people when a tower collapsed, a pure accident: did that happen because they were a worse kind of people than you were? No. Far more important and fruitful than speculating over how others died, is how you live, now.

“Unless you repent, you will all perish.” Jesus doesn’t mean “repent, otherwise this will happen to you.” Repent means to turn around, do something to head in a different direction, towards the way of life that follows God’s will. Then, no matter how you face your death, you will live. Life, the whole of our lives, is a journey of discerning that direction, taking wrong turns and turning around, “repenting,” seeking the way that witnesses to the glory of merciful God. No matter how lost we get, God waits, in God’s mercy, inviting us to come to the water, buy wine and milk without cost, so that none of us, even the wicked, perish.

The gardener in the story of the Fig Tree that didn’t bear fruit after three years tells us, God doesn’t just wait, but does everything to encourage us to bear fruit, tending with loving care. Where the way of our world would say cut it down, God says give it time, defying our logic of efficiency.

Last Friday, March 21st was the 44th anniversary of my “Coming to America Day,” when the 15-year old Takako said goodbye to her family at the airport in Tokyo. 44 years later, I was picking up my mother and my sister at the airport.

As I reflect on the most of these 44 years, what I see is my young stubborn self, rather than paying attention and listening to God, I lived by the mottos like as “Where there is a will, there is a way,” or “Go for broke,” or a quote from a well-known American Christian Educator in 19th century Japan William Clark, “Boys, be ambitious.”

For 44 years I was supported by my mother’s prayer who prayed “Let this one follow your path, O God.” For 44 years my sister has been forgiving her big sister who dropped out of site when she was only 12 and could have used a sister in her life. Somehow the Spirit guided that stubborn, head-strong young soul and found a home in God’s church and this morning we are all together, prayers answered, forgiveness offered and received. Thanks be to God.