

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 23, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: I Corinthians 10:1-13; 2nd Reading: Luke 13:1-9

Scripture for Message: Isaiah 55:1-9 “Still Time”

We’ve all seen the commercials – because of limited supplies and rising costs of manufacturing this is a limited offer – hurry before supplies run out, buy now! Is that the message in our scripture readings today? Maybe not – Isaiah’s invitation is for a feast that is free and abundant. Come and buy wine and milk without money, rich food without cost. Isaiah includes the warning, however, to call upon the Lord while he is near. That leads one to believe that the offer is not forever – but there is another way to look at that.

An illustration of both the gravity and the intensity of this invitation can be illustrated by a time of tragedy, such as a flood. A mother, a son, and a daughter are clinging to the upper branches of a large tree surrounded by raging flood waters. The rescue team in a boat cannot get right up to the tree because of debris, but the distance between the boat and the tree can be jumped with effort. The team in the boat shout with urgency, “jump, jump,” but the family members are afraid. Finally, summoning up courage, the son jumps and lands safely in the boat. Then the daughter jumps. She falls into the water, but the rescuers are ready and quickly pull her into the boat. Now the rescuers along with the son and daughter plead with the mother, “Jump, jump, you can do it! We’ll catch you if you fall short.” There is a compelling urgency in the invitation. But she is afraid, and as she debates whether to jump or remain in the apparent safety of the tree, there is a terrible crack, the tree falls, and she is swept away with it. “Seek the Lord while he may be found.”¹

Isaiah’s illustration of a banquet with good food and wine and an invitation to “come, buy and eat!” asks us to not settle for the costly things that provide little and compels us to take only what is good, what is freely offered and what satisfies our needs. Putting this in the context of Isaiah’s time, we find these words written to the exiled people of Israel. Calling them to return home and leave the apparent safety of Babylon where they lived under Babylonian and Persian rule. Isaiah invites the people to experience the grace and forgiveness that God freely offers – step away from the life in exile that comes with a high price and separates one from a relationship with the one true God – their God. Isaiah’s words remind them of the everlasting covenant God made with his servant David,

¹Oswalt, John N. *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah, From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life*. Zondervan. 2003. Print. 603

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a covenant of steadfast love and security – the time has come for the people to return to the Lord, and to return to the land God promised them.

Why are we in the book of Isaiah in the middle of Lent? The usual focus for most of us during the Lenten season is sacrifice. People traditionally fast and focus on repentance. My spouse and I recently had a conversation about what we usually sacrifice during Lent. For a lot of people who choose to journey with Jesus to the cross, that journey is a solemn one, filled with sacrifice and self-reflection. That journey however does not necessarily have to be based on wrath, guilt, blame, or punishment – Isaiah tells us that God desires reconciliation and restoration. I told you at the beginning of our Lenten season that we would not be singing alleluia's, today however is an exception. We can shout alleluia as we focus on God's grace that enables repentance, God's grace that evokes a response to move toward God rather than further away. What Isaiah tells us is that God is ultimately good.

Part of God's promise is restoration and redemption, and Isaiah calls attention to that promise saying "because of the Lord your God" nations will see that God is faithful despite the faithlessness of the people. That witness will call nations to run toward them seeking a closer relationship with God. This is God working through them for reconciliation with the world. This is God offering grace and forgiveness to everyone – all nations. Therefore, rather than taking an individualistic approach the community can ponder together God's unending and never-failing forgiveness.

Why are so many of us in the world not taking advantage of what is freely offered? What is getting in the way of our accepting God's promise? Is it the cross that gets in our way when we seek a relationship with God? Do the stories of Jesus sacrifice and our unworthiness make us too ashamed to approach Jesus or too proud to kneel at Jesus' feet? Why do so many of us, even when we hear the words of God through Isaiah that offer abundance at no cost, turn away and refuse to accept? What causes us to hesitate? What is it that keeps us from taking our places at God's banquet table? I wonder about those who fail to seek God while there is still time.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read one of Jesus' parables in addition to his teaching the crowds about repentance. Jesus has just finished telling the people not to worry about their future, that God would be with them, he tells them however to be watchful because you do not know when the "end" will come. Some of them come to him with stories about the suffering and death of innocents. Jesus asks this question, "do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?"

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Sometimes, we who are church-going Christians think we deserve better, more than those sinners who don't go to church. We tell ourselves that dreadful things happen to people who deserve punishment. Jesus is telling the people that the calamities that happened to these individuals or groups are not punishment for their sins – we are all sinners, and one is no worse than another in God's eyes. If God punished sins in that manner no one on earth would stand a chance. God is the God of abundant pardon, disasters are not God's punishments for sin, but punishment will come upon all who turn away from God. "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Paul's words to the people of Corinth remind us of these same things, and adds this caveat, "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall." Paul tells the people of Corinth that the disasters and calamities he mentions were written down to instruct us – Seek the Lord while there is still time. Paul's words, and Jesus' words, remind me that there are consequences of sin which comes to us as instructive discipline. Paul writes, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." It gives me hope knowing that God thinks I am strong enough, but even if I am not God's presence will enable me to endure whatever testing may come my way.

The parable Jesus tells illustrates the message to "cultivate" your relationship with God while there is still time. When the harvester comes, that which does not bear fruit will be cut away. The parable tells us that the gardener will "dig around the tree and put fertilizer on it to encourage it to bear fruit." For the individual believer that cultivation work means that we spend time in God's word, drawing closer to God, and seeking God while there is time.

There are those who don't want to "buy" what God is offering thinking the price is too high – I think I must give up too much and I enjoy my life right now, I don't need God. Maybe people just don't understand what the rewards of a life with Christ are, so they wait. Just like that mother in the tree from the illustration I read this morning, there is fear of the unknown and we are comfortable with the status quo. If we, however, wait to fully understand what God is about, it may be too late. God is beyond human understanding; greater than any explanation we can apply to God. Human thoughts cannot grasp the vastness that is God – there are no words in the human language that adequately describe God. We must realize that whatever we say about God, God is that and God is more than that. When God, through Isaiah's words, tells us "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" it is instruction for us to come to the table anyway.

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Faith must come first, and understanding will follow but even if you never fully understand, come anyway.

Seek the Lord, buy wine and milk without money and without price. How do we purchase what is freely offered? Why does God give us this call to come purchase and eat? To me, it is an actual invitation to experience grace and forgiveness – commodities that are free to all who will accept. The purchase price has already been paid by God’s own son. Jesus paid the price for us – we buy this out of our belief and willingness to follow the one who died for us. The cost for us is to listen to and follow the one who made an everlasting covenant in his blood, on the cross. The price we pay is the shedding of our old selves and accepting the abundance God offers. God’s promise of abundant pardon is fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ – restoring people from exile. What Jesus brings to us is free, what the “world” offers is costly – it could cost us our souls.

What the cross offers is free – grace and forgiveness is free. What God offers us is free and it satisfies the soul. The lesson of the Old Testament is that God is gracious, merciful, and compassionate even to the faithless and hard-hearted. If God offers all of this to the people of Israel, can we imagine how much that means to us as we struggle to be faithful? We cannot let the world get in the way of our accepting God’s freedom. “The lure of wealth and accumulation creates distance from the kingdom of light and eats away at notions of justice and righteousness.”² The world tries to lure us with what looks like riches and abundance, but we know that fades – only God is eternal, only what God offers can satisfy.

We cannot let pride or shame get in the way of accepting God’s offer. “Why spend your [soul’s] money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy. God prepares a rich banquet for us, food for the soul which satisfies our soul’s needs. However, that banquet table is useless to those who are too proud or too ashamed to come and eat from it. Jesus presents to us the example of humility on the cross – Jesus’ shame overcomes any shame we could feel. Jesus, with arms open wide, calls to us to come buy that which is good. The message is not that good things will come to those who wait. Instead, the message is good things are found when you faithfully seek God’s face. In Jesus Christ, God is near to us. In Christ God is found. In Christ, God abundantly pardons. Seek the Lord while there is still time.

² David Davis. “Third Sunday in Lent, Isaiah 55:1-9, Connecting the Reading with the World.” *Connections Year C. Vol 2, Lent through Pentecost*. eds. Green, Long, Powery, & Rigby. WJK. 2018. Print. 62-64.