

Isaiah 55: 1-9

Invitation to the Thirsty

In this passage, the author is prompting, calling, and urging the faithful to recognize the fullness of God. In the ancient world, when a new king assumed the throne he would often issue an edict declaring a release from all debts. The king would also call for a great banquet to be enjoyed by the people of the kingdom. Both events, the edict and the banquet, signalled a new day under a new king. The opening lines of Chapter 55 signal the reader to the approach of a different banquet... not in the form of wine, milk, bread, and rich food but in what God can provide to a thirsty people.

Remember that these words are spoken to the Hebrew exiles in Babylon. These people had a choice to make. They could consent to follow the glory that dominated the culture and beliefs of the Babylonian Empire, a glory that was tangible, concrete, and elicited praise as well as admiration... or the divine glory of embracing, of including, and of justice to which we also are called. God's glory provides meaning and purpose to our lives and brings us into union with one another and with Creation. We are called to the feast of such a relationship.

The themes in Isaiah reflect the overall thrust of Lent. The time of Lent is an invitation to the thirsty. The invitation, however, is to do more than simply drink from the waters but to participate in the work of God. It is a work directed at more than what is in our minds and hearts, but a work that expands from what is inside of us to all of God's world.

Lent is an invitation as well as a reminder that this work of God is open to all of us.

Psalm 63: 1-8

A Psalm of David When He Was in the Desert of Judah

(From the Center of Excellence in Preaching)

What you pay attention to will shape your thoughts, your emotions, your experiences, and your desires.

That sounds like an easy task to be successful at, but so much of our paying attention is involuntary, the response to the immediate stimuli of our environment. We automatically zero in on what is the most obvious at that moment: the interruption of a cell phone during a conversation, the buzzing of a wasp around your face, the crying of a child, or the pain of a stubbed toe. So much of our attention is captured by the most pressing sensation of the moment.

These occurrences cause our attention to wander... to flit from stimuli to stimuli.

For us to pay attention to God, to believe in Him, to trust Him, to obey Him, and to desire his ways we must decide to not focus on other things... we have to decide what we will NOT pay attention to.

But how do we pay attention to someone we cannot see or hear or touch?

Jesus said, "Ask and it shall be given to you. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened to you." In the very act of asking, seeking, or knocking, we are paying attention to God.

2.

We can also pay attention to God through His works. As you gaze at the majesty of a sunset, the tender beauty of a flower, the face of another whom you love, focus on what the work of God reveals about God. Or remember how the works of God have provided for your needs, in protecting you from danger, and in nudging you to make an important decision.

More importantly, focus on Jesus, who is the very image of the invisible God. When your attention wanders, focus yourself on Christ.

Then remind yourself that we are not saved by paying attention. We are saved by God's grace that brings us forgiveness and healing through Jesus. Let our efforts to focus on God lead us again and again to Christ.

Luke 13: 6-9

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

Luke 13, verses 1-9, engages the listeners of Jesus in the age-old question of how we recognize winners and losers. Jesus' response is this parable telling us that the only marker of our success is our readiness to bear the fruit of God's kingdom.

The three entities in the story all have symbolic significance. The vineyard owner represents God, the one who rightly expects to see fruit on His tree and who justly decides to destroy it when He finds none. The gardener, who cares for the trees, represents Jesus, who feeds his people and gives them living water. The tree itself has two symbolic meanings: that the nation of Israel and us as individuals.

The vineyard owner expresses his disappointment with the fruitless tree. In three years the tree has yielded no fruit. Three years... the same number of years that John the Baptist and Jesus had preached the message of repentance throughout Israel. But the fruits of repentance had not been forthcoming.

However, we still see the gardener pleading for a little more time.

In the same way, God in his mercy grants us another day, another hour, another breath while Jesus knocks at the door of our heart seeking to gain entrance. But God's patience has a limit.

We learn from this parable that God expects you and me to produce fruit during our lives, for we are fig trees that possess advantages not possessed by all fig trees. We do not grow wild along the roadside or in rocky, shallow soil with nobody to tend us.

2.

We have been purposely planted in a vineyard. We enjoy good soil. We are watched over and taken care of. The owner of the vineyard expects a return on His investment. God is looking for fruit in our lives. Our shaking leaves of wailing, "Lord, Lord, Lord!" will not suffice. Our lives will be examined by God with the final determination of being satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

But notice that the gardener intercedes for the tree to enact a compromise... in truth another chance to use the time we have remaining to produce fruit in our lives.

But what if we shuffle the deck of characters in this parable?

What if we read this passage knowing that Jesus, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, was focused on turning people to a new way of living? What if the parable refers to us being the impatient land owner? What if the fig tree represents the Kingdom of God and God represents the gardener, who pleads with us not to give up so quickly because the manifestation of God's presence is not as immediate as we would like? What if Jesus is saying that we need to stop being so impatient with how we think things should be and instead take the time to care for the Kingdom of God already in our midst; to work toward changing attitudes and models of how life is. The way of God can be fruitful if we would only make the effort to offer it the necessary care.

That is the message of hope in the face of hardship... that God is not the cause of what ails us, our country, our world... but that God offers another way to work toward responding to our needs... for us to turn away from so many of the assumptions, attitudes, and self-righteous opinions that are so prevalent today and instead seek to grow the Kingdom of God.