

Sermon Isaiah 55:1-9

‘God’s Invitation – Our RSVP’

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025

In the book of Isaiah, we find some of the most beautiful words of hope and comfort for people living in challenging, even desperate times. Here God says, for example, ‘The people that walks in darkness has seen a great light.’ ‘Comfort, comfort now my people’. ‘Do not be afraid – I have redeemed you. I have called you by name – you are mine.’ ‘The wolf shall live with the lamb.’ ‘Nobody will harm or hurt on all of my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with my knowledge as water fills the sea.’ I don’t know about you, but these words give me the chills. God longs for a restoration of all relationships that are hurt and broken: between us and God, between human beings, and with all of God’s creation.

For God knows that we are East of Eden. One just has to watch or read the news about wars, threats, civil unrest, injustice, the callousness of the rich, the destruction of creation, hunger, and strive to realize that we are far – oh so far – from the realm that God envisions for us. And it’s only getting worse.

I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling parched right now. Thirsty for a glimmer of light and hope, thirsty for sanity, thirsty for civility, thirsty for justice, thirsty for a love that seeks the good of all people. Thirsty for the kind of realm Isaiah is talking about, as I pray fervently, ‘thy kingdom come, thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven’.

And I drink the words of comfort and hope that God offers, with something bordering on desperation. Because I just can’t give up, I can’t give in, I just mustn’t allow cynicism and bitterness to take over my heart, lest it shrivels and hardens and becomes barren. And God’s kingdom of love, mercy, peace, and justice can only come and grow if we open our hearts to it and make it our vision – a vision we live into through all we say and do.

Now God has invited people throughout history to live into this vision. The lesson from the Prophet Isaiah we heard today is an example for that. Here God pleads, Listen – listen carefully! Hear! Incline your ear! Find delight! See! Seek! And, over and over again: come!

Come! God extends this sweeping invitation – an invitation to partake in God’s realm, to live into God’s realm, to sit at God’s infinite table and feast on the life God offers, together with all of creation.

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

Why indeed? What is it about human nature through the ages - be it in the days of Isaiah roughly 2,700 years ago, or today - that we waste our time, our energies, our emotions, our talents, our money on things that offer us fulfilment that at best is shallow and fleeting?

Why do so many people – and I am not immune against it – find so much satisfaction in vilifying and scapegoating others, and in the resulting self-righteousness? Holding a grudge and being angry at someone can feel so good, right? But in the long run, it hurts us more than the one who did us wrong – and our heart shrivels.

Why do we buy into ideas, ideologies, and idols which offer us deceptively easy solutions for complex issues? Why are we predominantly worried about our investments into material things (especially right now that the stock market tanking) at the cost of investing into healthy relationships with God, with each other, and with all God created so lovingly? Somehow all this feels like fast food – arguably delicious and very satisfying for a short time, but not very nutritious and even bad for our health.

Why do we run from God when God calls out to us, ‘Come’? Why do we run from each other, prizing our individual freedom and independence over the commonwealth? We do we fail to see that we are all interdependent, like it or not, and that we better make it work, lest we all suffer?

Well, there is an answer for this which is pretty unpopular in our day and age: sin. Talk about an unpopular and seemingly archaic concept. And, if you read the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3, the sin is not disobedience, no, the serpent spells it out very directly: ‘Eat of this tree, and you shall be like God.’ You shall be like God – that’s the temptation, that’s the empty promise, that’s the desire of those first human beings, that’s at the heart of all our trespasses and missteps in life. We

think we know better than God. We do things our own way. We play God. And some more than others, as current politics show. The problem is that the kind of God most emulate is not a God of love and compassion, a God of over-abundance who invites all to share in it, a God of life to the fullest for all creation – quite the opposite.

I think it is amazing that God hasn't entirely given up on us. That God doesn't rescind his sweeping and generous invitation from Isaiah 55, 'come!' On the contrary, God is doubling down on the invitation: 'Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to God, that he may have mercy on them - to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.'

God doesn't close the door, God doesn't build a wall, God doesn't bar the gate, God doesn't give up on anyone - but shows a stubborn hope that anyone can turn around and repent. All are invited to share in the life to the fullest that God offers – even those we might consider unworthy of this kind of compassion and grace.

Now the words from Isaiah 55 we heard today were written roughly 600, 700 years before Christ was born, but they foreshadow his teachings of love, compassion, forgiveness, and mercy. The teaching of loving service and sacrifice for the sake of the world, which we see demonstrated in Christ's death on the cross. And those teachings always were and still are very hard to follow – because often we think we know better, and derive a strange, albeit fleeting, satisfaction from seeking fulfilment in all the wrong places, serving ourselves first and foremost rather than dedicating our lives to the loving service of others.

But we are not lost. God continues to invite us to come - through the words of Isaiah and other prophets, and through Jesus Christ. We are invited. And especially during this season of Lent – which traditionally has been a season of introspection, of fasting in the sense that we get rid of all that separates us from our relationship with God and with others, and of repentance in the sense that we stretch our hearts in the direction of love – God urges us to give our RSVP, preferably a positive one.

God pleads with us to accept that which is offered: the waters that gush up to eternal life to the fullest for all. Nourishment for our entire beings which lasts. Relationships that are based in love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and acceptance, and cannot be broken. To follow the ways of love that lead to life rather than the ways of hatred, ignorance, or indifference.

And this invitation starts in the here and now, and is not restricted to some heaven lightyears away. 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done – *on earth* as it is in heaven.'

So the question is: How do we respond?

Amen