

A Royal Invitation
Isaiah 55:1-9
March 24, 2019

In 586 BC the city of Jerusalem had been razed, the temple destroyed and their leaders killed or humiliated. Most of the population of Jerusalem and surrounding area were carted off to Babylon. In time, their children, who had known nothing other than Babylon, had grown up and had settled down in this strange, foreign land. They carved out a way of life as exiles, and started businesses. But for the first generation exiles it must have been a bitter and emotionally disturbing experience. Listen to their heart-rending song:

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Psalm 137)

Who doesn’t love to receive an invitation to a great party or dinner, especially if it is an invite to a posh event among the social elite? While Isaiah’s invitation may not be to a great party, it offers a welcome into God’s gracious presence. God may not be offering the best china and the best wine and the most lavish meal, but God is promising to satisfy our deepest longings and needs. When we get such an invite we might worry about what we will wear, how we will conduct ourselves, and whether or not we will be accepted. But the invite dismisses these worries by reminding us right in the invitation letter that the only condition is hunger and thirst.

Who does the prophet address this invitation to? Evidence suggests that it was given to the 2nd generation exiles. It is their good fortune to be ordered to return to the homeland. They personally had no memories of Jerusalem. They have only known Babylon and its gods. But a miracle happens! The Persian Empire under Cyrus defeats the Babylonians and not only allows the Jews to return to their land, but

orders them to rebuild the temple. But they return to a land scarred by invasion, by poverty, and by many competing tribes. It will prove a great challenge to fulfil Cyrus' command.

Many people today think of the bible as a collection of ancient religious teachings that have little or no relevance to history or to our life today. They would argue that chapters like the one before us today in Isaiah 55 might have some inspiring lines, but has absolutely no connection with history, or anything meaningful to say to us today. In fact, this entire section of Isaiah from chapter 40 through 55 is set within world events. The prophet is keenly aware that God is active in the rise and fall of empires and even if Israel is caught up in the whirlwind of events it is never without God's purposes unfolding. This consciousness of God within history was born for Israel in the Exodus and developed throughout its life up to this tragic exile.

The prophet is addressing folks whose sacred centre in Jerusalem, one that had held together an orderly universe, is destroyed. The Jerusalem temple, the priesthood, and royal court, which gave life a sense of order and unity in Judah, had been buried under the boots of the Babylonian army in 586 B.C. That was roughly fifty years ago. Where is their center now?

The command to return home is not mere pious language. God's centre is never far from the heartbeat of the world's ticking clock of history. Coming back to that centre is Israel's invitation to join in the world story-telling once again. All is not lost. God's timetable is moving forward and God had brought king Cyrus of Persia into the mix to accomplish God's purposes. The question is whether they are hungry and thirsty enough to want to bow their hearts.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labour for that which does not satisfy? (Isaiah 55:1-2)

In 1994 Gail, her parents and I drove to Colorado. The journey took us through South Dakota and along route 90 that passes through Sioux Falls and Rapid City. It's a long highway and you felt like you were in the middle of a land devoid of people or civilization. Not long

out on the highway, on the rolling grasslands, I spotted a billboard advertising Wall Drug and a glass of free water. We didn't think much more about it until an hour later we saw another billboard for Wall.

Now this was intriguing. There must have been well over a dozen of these signs by the time we arrived in Wall and guess what, we went on into Wall. In fact Wall Drug has over 500 miles of billboards on route 90 and spends around \$400,000 on them every year. Turns out Wall is a small village of a few hundred residents where Ted Husted back in 1931 established a drug store. Business was slow in Wall until his wife Dorothy came up with an idea. She suggested they advertise a free glass of water to parched travelers and sure enough business picked up. Now Wall is a tourist attraction as it sits near the Badlands National Park. It now has a sprawling mall, gift shop, restaurants, and of course a drug store. And yes, you still get a free glass of water.

Lent is about finding our centre again in God's grace and love. Isaiah is a wonderful invitation to find our way into this delicious life of the Spirit. Water and bread, symbols for the basics of our life, are offered free. All we have to do is come and eat and drink. But instead society tells us a different story. It tells us that life is found elsewhere. It claims the good life is found within the confines of the material world. Believing this lie we chase the rainbow and find ourselves stuffed full of the things advertising tells us we need. But I don't know if you have noticed that the more we buy the less satisfied we are. Why do we spend our labour, our money, on the stuff that fails to satisfy us? Perhaps because we too, even as Christians, have been beguiled by the dark Lord.

There is a wonderful line in Ian McEwan's novel, **Saturday**. His main character, Henry Perowne, reflects on the power of commerce to block our religious impulses. He dodges around the crowds of shoppers on Marylebone High Street in London, England, and muses to himself on how protective, even soothing is this world of shops and goods. The commercial wellbeing is robust, he thinks, and will triumph over any invitation into the religious life. He says to himself:

It isn't rationalism that will overcome the religious zealots, but ordinary shopping and all that it entails-jobs for a start, and peace,

and some commitment to realizable pleasures, the promise of appetites sated in this world, not the next. Rather shop than pray. (p.126)

Into our present Western empire, our post-modern, post-Christendom post-rational, post-denominational society we now inhabit, comes this invitation from Isaiah and from Jesus. Our empire, not unlike past empires, offers us a great deal within its definition of the good life.

It's interesting to me that the Psalmist expresses what many of us must feel from time to time. Listen again to his plea:

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Psalm 63:1)

So where do you suppose she looks for her answer? Not where many of us would think to look I suspect. She looks for God in the sanctuary. And what does she discover? Listen to her surprising discovery:

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me (verses 5-8)

You probably all know the song Barbara Streisand made popular. It goes like this:

Someday Somewhere We'll find a new way of living
We'll find a way of forgiving
Somewhere There's a place for us
Somewhere a place for us
Peace and quiet and open air
Wait for us somewhere
There's a time for us
Someday there'll be a time for us
Time together with time to spare
Time to learn Time to care Someday
Somewhere We'll find a new way of living

We'll find there's a way of forgiving Somewhere
Somewhere
Somewhere There's a place for us
A time and a place for us
Hold my hand and we're half way there
Hold my hand and I'll take you there
Somehow Someday Somewhere

The prophet suggests that we need to respond while there is time on our side.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 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. (Isaiah 55:6-7)

There is an RSVP in the invitation God sends to the human family. Through the prophet we learn that we need to respond while there is still time. Are you still hungry and thirsty? Reply to the RSVP.

Amen