

Isaiah 55:1-9

The comedian Mitch Hedberg tells a joke where he relays a common experience we all know from crowded restaurants. When restaurants get busy, they start a waiting list. Then the host or hostess will call the party when their table is ready: “Dufresne, party of two. Dufresne.” If no one responds, they will repeat the name: “Dufresne, party of two.” Then after a minute they will move on to the next name: “Bush, party of three. Your table is ready.” Then Mitch stops and says, “Wait a minute, what happened to the Dufresnes? Nobody seems to care about them. How can you eat at a time like this? People are missing! He goes on to detail his fantasy of the Defresnes’ fate: they’re locked up in someone’s car with tape over their mouths, and they’re hungry. We have to find them! Bush, search party of three. You can eat once you find the Dufresnes.”

How can you eat at a time like this?

The people who put the lectionary texts together chose this passage from Isaiah to be read during Lent. In the Christian year, Lent marks the forty days Jesus spent in the desert, fighting temptation from Satan. As Pastor Kevin has mentioned, many Christians choose to spend this season giving up a worldly luxury in order to focus more fully on God. Many choose to fast, giving up food.

And here, the third Sunday in Lent, we read this passage that speaks of decadent indulgence. The prophet speaks in the voice of the LORD, saying, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Later in the passage, the prophet writes, eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. According to the commentary I read on this (I am taking beginning Hebrew, but I am not at the level to read it on my own yet), this can also be translated, “let your soul delight itself in fatness.” What is going on here? In a season where we are to focus on taking in less, the prophet in the LORD’s voice invites us to indulge. Is this a cruel taunt?

I also think of those who cannot come to eat and drink so freely. When we choose to delay our biological needs, we can stand in greater solidarity with those for whom this giving up is not a choice, who are forced into hunger because of systems that allow some to live in poverty while others indulge. Who cannot afford to spend money for bread, let alone that which is not bread.

How can you eat at a time like this?

First of all, knowing about Hebrew Wisdom literature will help us better understand what the prophet is trying to say here. The wisdom literature tradition uses metaphors of drinking and eating to represent partaking of God's offerings. We see this same language in the Psalm we responsively sang today: "My soul is satisfied, as with a rich feast." Here we see the idea of one who not only trusts in God, but reaches out to God in times of need and finds fulfillment in their spirit.

Still, I find it hard to cling on to this language of abundance and richness in times that feel scarce. I will be honest: I had a hard time writing this sermon this week. As I have shared with some of you, I am currently going through a separation from my husband. This week was our fifteenth wedding anniversary. We specifically chose the spring equinox as our date because we wanted our marriage to symbolize the growth of new life. Many of my friends are very ecologically focused and tied to the rhythms of the earth, so on Facebook I saw many wishes for a happy spring. Every one of those messages brought our anniversary to mind, since those events have been tied together in my mind for so long. When a relationship ends and is so attached to the promise of renewal...I'm still getting used to how that feels.

So what does it mean to read these verses in a time of personal difficulty? How do we read these words when we are in our own "wilderness times," and the idea of joyfully engaging in rich food and drink of any kind just rings hollow? That's what I've spent the last week or so trying to figure out for myself.

For me, it helps to remember that these verses were written for a people living in exile. The history of who wrote which parts of Isaiah and when is not entirely clear or agreed upon by all scholars. However, it is likely that it was written in sections over a period of centuries. Later writers were looking back over the history of the Hebrew people in relationship with God and surrounding peoples who had conquered them. These verses were written to and for a people who were not living in the lap of luxury. People for whom this call of abundance was not a present reality but a future promise. They could read and embody these words in honest faith because they placed their trust in a good God who offers the promise of good things. The prophet reminds us that God promises his people an everlasting covenant. When we suffer these times of loss and uncertainty, our God is always with us.

The Jews for whom these words were written trusted in God to restore Jerusalem—that was the promise they looked forward to. Eating and drinking the fullness of what God has to offer was trusting in God’s providence and promises—being in relationship with God in the midst of uncertainty, loss, and pain. We may despair of how we have been hurt by others or feel crushed under the weight of our own mistakes. But the prophet reassures us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, and God’s ways are not our ways. Thank God!

Christians understand the prophecies of Isaiah to point forward to God’s promises as revealed in Jesus, the Word made flesh. In Acts 13:34, the author ties this passage to Jesus’ resurrection, writing, “I will give you the holy promises made to David.” Jesus reveals to us the fullness and truth of God’s covenant with us. He is with us through his Spirit throughout all the challenges of our lives.

Being a Christian does not make life easier. In fact, in my own journey, I have found that following Jesus has led me to some difficult but necessary choices. Sometimes tragedy hits for no apparent reason. I remember once when I read a

particularly nasty story in the news—I think it was a shooting or some manner of natural disaster—I prayed to God, saying, “You know, it’s this sort of thing that makes it difficult for people to believe in You.” I was a very new Christian at that point, and I did not recall ever praying in that way before. Looking back, I see that prayer as a mark of my growing trust in God—I could trust him with my own frustration with our world. I could simply lament.

I have found myself praying a lot this week. In fact, in the midst of the pain, loss, and uncertainty I have been feeling, I find myself drawing deeply into intimacy with God in a way I have not in surer times. This makes sense to me. Catholic theologian Jean Vanier has said, “To pray is essentially to come to Jesus and to drink.” The author of Isaiah opens our passage with, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.” And this theme of thirst is echoed in our Psalm for today: “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.” When we are already hydrated, drinking a glass of water is okay. But when we are parched, the necessity of that water is much clearer.

This is how I see these passages fitting into the “desert” time of Lent. When the Psalmist writes of water, these are the words of one crying out for God from dry place. When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, it was his strength in God that got him through. When Satan pushes Jesus to command stones to turn to bread, Jesus finds the strength to say, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” In times of scarcity, Jesus lived on the bread that is God.

Of course we must be careful to not allow these words to serve as an excuse to separate personal spirituality from the life of service Jesus calls us to. Jesus also calls us to feed the hungry and give water to those who thirst—literal water. But these words remind us that even when we cannot see the path ahead, even when we

despair, God is trustworthy. When we are depleted, we can always come to Jesus in prayer, in the midst of our own dry wilderness journeys, and drink.

Since I have started acknowledging Lent the past couple of years, I have found that something related to a personal wilderness arises for me in that time. If you're like me, shaped by the culture that we are in, you might also place a high value on comfort. When I feel discomfort, my first reaction is to fold inward—to do whatever I can to move back to a state of comfort as quickly as possible, even if it means retaining a status quo that is less than ideal. Even if that temporary comfort might mean hurting myself or others more in the long run. But in this season especially, when I begin to feel that, it helps for me to remember Jesus in the desert. When he got hungry, it would have been so easy for him to call on those stones and have them turn into bread. But he knew—even if the “why” still seems murky to me sometimes when I read that—that it was not the time for that. He trusted that the time for bread would come again. He trusted in his Father.

I invite you, especially if you are going through your own wilderness journey, to come to God in prayer with whatever you are feeling. You may not be happy with God right now, and that's okay. If you want confirmation of that, the entire book of Lamentations is with you. In that book, the writer laments the destruction of Jerusalem. God does not speak, and redemption seems out of reach. But Lamentations is not the end. When we are depleted, when we cannot see the road ahead, God is there, even in the times when our own faith fails. Lean on your friends who are strong in their faith. Ask them for prayer. Ask for healing. And whatever your need or fear or shame right now, do not hesitate to come to Jesus and to drink.