

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Isaiah 55:1-13 “Come, You Thirsty”

Advent is a time of new beginnings. In liturgical churches it is the start of a new “Church year”, the end of “ordinary time.” As prelude to the Feast of the Nativity, which we now call Christmas, it is a time of expectation and of preparation – indeed in the olden days, it was a time of self-examination and repentance which prepared people for “the coming of the Lord.” It’s no coincidence that the church has always turned in Advent to Isaiah – like others of the 8th century BC “prophets of the exile,” his theme is the new start in the life of God’s people after their long Babylonian captivity.

1) *An Invitation*

Having prophesied that the “Servant of the Lord” will suffer and make redemption for his people, Isaiah tells of God’s gracious invitation that will now extend beyond Israel to “all nations” – to the *goyim* as well as the Jews. “Come, *all* you who are thirsty; come to the waters.”

This is promise and hope as never before. Although God’s people, and all nations, wander far from God’s purposes, he invites them all to turn to him and find the satisfaction that their restless searching can never give. And it is not only *water* to slake their deep thirst and refresh their bodies; it is *milk* to nourish them and help them grow; it is *wine* to make their hearts glad. God offers

things that go far beyond mere survival: he offers what will make people *flourish*.

And it is all a gift; it is *free*: “you who have no money... come and buy... without money and without cost.” How can this be? Because that is the nature of God – to renew and refresh, to forgive and restore people who cannot help themselves; and it is also because the price for all this has already been *paid* – by the Suffering Servant who “had the iniquity of us all laid on him... by whose wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53). “Comfort my people,” says your God; “speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and tell her that her sin has been paid for” (Isaiah 40).

The only condition attached to God’s invitation is that whoever hears his call should *listen*. “Give ear to me and come to me,” says the LORD. Who can receive the gifts of God? Those who are thirsty, and know it; and those who listen, and come and drink. Of course there were those in Israel who did not listen, and many among “the nations” who did not listen. There have always been, and we suspect there always will be. Some people feel no thirst.

But other people are deeply aware that they are “spending money on what is not bread, and laboring for what does not satisfy.” Truth be told, there are times when all of us feel that way, and I suppose the question is how long those feelings last, how deeply

they go, and whether we are prepared to listen to the inner voice that says "there has to be more to life than this." If life is no more than work, work, work - at home or on the job - if the labors of years can be blown away in a moment by the foolishness of one person; if our life savings can be destroyed by a broken hip; if our sense of well-being can be destroyed by one doctor's appointment; maybe our foundations are less secure than we thought?

Are you thirsty? For water, milk, wine? Then the word of the LORD is "Come, and drink..." "Listen, and come..." You and I must do our parts: God seeks us, but we must also seek him; God speaks, but we must listen; God gives, but we must receive and "drink." "Seek the Lord while he may be found," says Isaiah, reminding us that *now* is the time - that God's offer is not indefinite; there will be a time when it's too late. You can't afford to gamble that you can "live like hell" and at the last minute "decide for heaven."

2) How Does God Call?

Well, you may say, this all sounds good, but I have never actually heard God call, never received this invitation! How does God supposedly do this? How do I know that the invitation you talk about is real, and not just a projection of your imagination, the way you wish things were?

The answer sounds ridiculously simple, and is - but yet it is also the most intellectually and morally challenging idea that you will ever confront (which of course is one reason so many people never embrace it). *God has spoken. His words are available to us.* That is such an outrageous idea that highly educated theologians still debate endlessly whether it is even possible that "God has spoken and we have heard his words."

But that is the claim of this book that we read from and preach from every Sunday, that we examine and discuss all week in classes, that we teach our children from infancy to high school. The Bible claims to be *the Word of God*. And as the LORD says through Isaiah, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways" - mine are "much higher." That is why you need to listen, that is why you need to seek me, that is why you need to turn from evil and turn towards me. I am God, and you are not. I am in heaven, and you are not. When I speak, you listen.

In fact it is a great condescension on God's part that he - in John Calvin's metaphor - "stoops down and lisps in baby language" so that we can hear and understand even a little of his ways and his will. Simplified as it is, God's Word is still challenging enough to exhaust a lifetime of study by the best of minds. And to be ready to submit ourselves to that Word, to "listen and give ear" to it, is one of the most humbling and challenging things we will ever be called to do. Beware of people who seem to sit *in judgment* on the Scriptures; they give themselves away. "God's thoughts are *higher* than our thoughts."

And because his Word, or his words, come from God - because they are divine - they have *power*. They are not just one more set of opinions among many others. The Bible is powerful. "My word does not return to me empty," says the LORD; "it will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." How it does that remains a mystery to us, even after millennia of study. Perhaps it's like the snow and rain that come down and work slowly, silently, almost invisibly. Maybe it takes a long time for green shoots of faith to emerge and prove they have been nourished down in the moist earth. But God's Word is powerful, and it is never wasted.

I challenge you, as Isaiah did his people in the 8th century BC, to take the Word of God seriously, to “listen and give ear” to it. This Christmas, we are offering you a free *One-Year Bible, New Testament*; if you will devote 10 minutes a day to reading, you can complete the entire New Testament in 365 days – and in a very easy and friendly translation. If you have never done it before, I promise you it will change your life! The Word of God is powerful, and it accomplishes what God intends for it. Are you ready to listen? Are you thirsty enough to come? Are you tired of spending money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Then come, listen, drink.

3) Let Him Come To Me

But for a few minutes, we must skip forward in time 700 years from Isaiah to the Temple courtyard in Jerusalem in around 33 AD. It is *Sukkot* – the “Feast of Booths,” the “Feast of Tabernacles” “*The Feast*” (John 7). Thousands of pilgrims stay in the city from Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – until Sukkot, the feast of harvest, the annual Jewish “Thanksgiving” in September/October. In the 1st century, and for generations, for seven days the priests walked down from the Temple mount to the Pool of Siloam and filled golden pitchers with water. The crowds cheered, and everyone walked back to the Temple. It was called “the Drawing of the Waters.” The pitchers were emptied around the altar, and became part of the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and symbolized prayers for rain for the coming year.

On the 8th day of the Feast (when according to some Jewish historians the waters were not drawn), Jesus stood up in the Temple courtyard and cried aloud “*If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.*” The crowds’ reaction was immediate. Who is this? Is he a prophet returned? Is he the

Messiah? No – he’s just some man from the north – from Galilee...

Jesus calls the thirsty to come and drink – and he invites them to come *to him*. As he had told the woman at a Samaritan well – as far away from the Jerusalem Temple and its priests as you could get! – “whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst again” (John 4). How can this be? How can Jesus give the life-renewing water of God? Because *he is the powerful Word of God, in the flesh*. Suddenly we sense why God’s “Word” is so effective – it is not just spoken language, it is personal; it is a person, “the Word who is God and who was God from the beginning” (John 1).

And now “the Word has become flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory.” And to come to him, to listen to him, is to truly accept the invitation that the LORD offered all nations through Isaiah. People who come to Jesus are not only refreshed, they themselves become *new springs* of water that refresh others, and which will “bubble up” to all eternity. “By this,” explains John, “Jesus meant *the Spirit...* who had not yet been given”

If you want to be satisfied; if you are tired of labor that gets you nowhere; if you are thirsty for meaning; if you know that wandering in the marshes has left you muddy and unhappy; come to Jesus, listen to him, drink from him the water of life. You can meet him, as you would expect, in the “new pages” of his Word; the New Testament, in the words that describe his birth, his life, his teaching, his death, his rising – the redemption of his people that Isaiah foresaw in his “Suffering Servant.” You will begin to understand the life of his community of disciples as they took his invitation to “come to him” to “all nations” that could be reached in the 1st century, and how people found satisfaction for themselves

that they had never known, and how they became a blessing to their societies that nobody expected.

Jesus is coming! That's what Advent is here to remind us of. "Come to him if you are thirsty... come buy milk and wine without cost..."

Let us pray...