

**Eighth Sunday after Epiphany
(Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; Luke 6:39-49; I Corinthians 15:51-58.

Isaiah 55:10-13 is the ending of a magnificent message that makes up the entirety of the 55th chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah. It is the message of the covenant that stands both between God and Israel, and between God and the whole human order. It is likened to an abundant and magnificent banquet hosted by God and given to Israel as God's gift to them and in which they can fully partake. Chapter 55 begins with these striking words.

“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 labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David” (55:1-3).

This is a statement of full, unadulterated grace. The banquet of the covenant is a free gift from God to Israel. It requires no money to purchase its food and drink. It demands no labor or action from the Israelites. It is God's free gift to Israel. They are simply to receive it and delight in God's abundant giving to them. All that Israel needs to do is to respond to God's covenant love for them. They are simply to accept that they are already accepted, to believe that they are already loved by God – loved enough for him to make “an everlasting covenant” with them!

The text continues. “See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you” (55:4-5).

God's grace, once offered exclusively to Israel, is now offered to the peoples and institutions of the whole world. These people and political, economic and religious systems – whoever they are and wherever they may be – can become the world as God intended it to be, the community of shalom. All the peoples and systems of the world can live out of a framework of justice, equitable distribution of wealth, the elimination of poverty and personal and corporate relationship with God and each other. God's grace is for all!

It is with this assertion that this great chapter nears its close. And today's Old Testament lesson presents those closing words.

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (55:10-11).

It is a profound promise that God has given to his listeners in this chapter – that God’s irresistible grace is offered to all. It is given not only to Israel, but is offered to all the peoples and systems of the world as God’s free and indisputable gift.

But do we dare believe such a message? It sounds more than marvelous. But how do we know it is true? Can we dare to trust this word from the prophet?

It is God – and not just the prophet – who speaks. “My word shall go out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it”. How do we know that this message of irresistible grace to God’s people throughout the world is true? We know it is true because it is God who speaks it!

Therefore, how shall we respond? We can do nothing to earn such good news, or to make ourselves acceptable to it. All that we can do to such good news is to party! Celebration at God’s irresistible love is both the only natural and the only appropriate response. “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off” (55:12-13)!

This, indeed, is the Word of the Lord!

Psalm 92 responds in a comparable way. “It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy” (92:1-4).

Psalm 92 begins centered on the worship and sheer enjoyment of God. In that sense, it is a perfect response to the message of Isaiah 55. But it quickly changes in its middle section, because it shifts attention from joy over God’s embrace of us to those who won’t embrace anyone or anything.

“The dullard cannot know, the stupid cannot understand how great are your works, O Lord. Though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever. All evildoers shall be scattered” (92:5-7, 9b).

The dullard, the stupid, the wicked, the evil doers! This Psalmist notes those in society closed to God’s marvelous work of *chesedh*, steadfast love in their midst. They cannot or will not recognize what God has done for them, and so it is that they will live their lives caught up in their own agendas and unaware of what God is about in the world. Their eyes are closed!

Psalm 92 is a psalm of vindication. But it is also a psalm that ends by offering substantive hope.

“The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they shall produce fruit;

they are always green and full of sap, showing that the Lord is upright; he is my rock and there is no unrighteousness in him” (vss. 12-15).

The “righteous”, the Psalmist declares, “still produce fruit” in old age, “are always green and full of sap”. There are those chosen by God and consequently open to the grace he proffers them. Whether of the Hebrew people or whether from a people who had not known God, whether of east or west, whether of one political or economic ideology or of another, these are God’s chosen who have been irresistibly wooed to him by God’s grace.

The sign that they are God’s people is their continued commitment to living out God’s shalom community in the world. They “still produce fruit” into old age, and “are always green and full of sap”. In other words, it is the righteous that will continue to be productive, even into old age. Because they are centered both on a right relationship with God and are working for justice, they will be “inner-directed”, and centered upon continuing to make a contribution to the world. Thus, because of the inner drive given to them by God, they will remain productive far into their physically waning years. And it is that promise that gives us hope and motivation, even as our bodies begin to slow down and we are not able to perform with the energy that once was ours. That is the promise of this Psalmist.

Luke 6:39-49 concludes his “Sermon on the Plain”, Luke’s comparable sermon to Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount.” Earlier, Jesus had addressed the issue, “How, then, shall we live?” As people of Jesus’ Jubilee community, what should be the style of our life? He had suggested three characteristics. First, we are to love our enemies – the expendables who live in such poverty and powerlessness, the aristocracies whose greed and policies have created an expendable class, and the peasants caught in between. Second, do good in totally unexpected ways, thus halting around you the hatred, alienation and the eventual collapse of society wrought by the policies of the greedy. Third, live your lives being a blessing to others, so that the most revolutionary act would not be the rebellious act but the transformational act. This is the message that immediately precedes today’s Gospel lesson.

Jesus begins today’s lesson with the words, “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye, when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (vss. 39-42).

The word “rabbi” means “my teacher.” Israel at the time of Jesus was full of “rabbis” – Pharisees, Sadducees and priests that were only too quick to tell people how they should live. But their lives were not in conformity to their teachings. And their teachings were gauged to require obedience of the Law of Moses that would burden peasants and expendables while creating enough flexibility for Jewish religious and political leaders that they could make significant profit and build significant power while insisting that they were being faithful to the Law.

So which rabbi will you follow? If you select one who is blind to his own manipulation of the Law, if you select one who cannot see the dominating nature of his teaching and actions, then you, too, are destined to stumble into the same pit as will they. Consequently, a part of answering the question, “How, then, shall we live?” is to answer the question “Who, then, shall we follow?”

Jesus continues. “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit. For each tree is known by its fruit. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (vss. 43-45). In the final analysis, Jesus teaches, it is not the confession of Yahweh as Lord that determines the sincerity of the person making that confession. Anyone can say, “Lord, Lord”. It is, rather, his actions. For it is one’s actions – the committed way he works for justice for all or protection of his class of people, the effort to equitably distribute wealth and battle against poverty or use the Law to accumulate increasing wealth – that reveal the depths of a person’s values and commitments.

So the issue is, “What kind of life are you building for yourself?” Are you building a life erected on deep and God-centered values, or is it built on sand? What your life becomes is determined by the priorities you set and the values you choose to live out. Consequently, Jesus concludes his sermon, build on sure and solid foundations; work for Christ and his kingdom, and everything else will be added to you!

I Corinthians 15:51-58 is a magnificent hymn written by Paul, celebrating the reality of the resurrection promise that comes in Christ. He writes, “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory!” Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 15:51-57).

It is a victorious hymn, a profound statement of faith, a poetic capturing of resurrection joy. But it doesn’t end there. After such a rhapsodic chorus, Paul does not end with words of thanks with God, but with the most practical and concrete words.

“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (vs. 28).

Back down to earth! The message for the follower of Jesus, even at this moment of ecstasy, is the concrete and practical “Keep on keeping on!” Be steadfast in your love. Be immovable in your faith. Excel in the work of the Lord. Keep your eye on the prize, and keep on moving toward it. Remember that the authenticity of faith is made manifest in our actions. It is how we

choose to live that decrees in whom we trust and in what we believe. Words are not the final arbiter. Deeds are. And how you choose to live is your strongest witness either for or against the God you might profess!

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