

3rd Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; Luke 13:1-9; I Corinthians 10:1-13

Isaiah 55:1-9 is a celebration of the covenant that exists between Yahweh and Israel. 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.

“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 covenantal love for them. They are to embrace it, 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 had made an “everlasting covenant” with David that continues down the centuries with Israel. This emphasis on the Davidic covenant is found throughout the warp-and-woof of Hebrew scripture. What makes this statement unusual, however, is that the author extends that covenant to the world – a theme throughout Second Isaiah but found rarely elsewhere in the Old Testament (42:6; 45:5-7, 22-23; 49:6; 56:3-8). “See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you”. That is, God's people will reach out to and impact the entire world – both the peoples of the world and the nations (that is, the corporate entities of the peoples) of the world. God's grace, originally reserved for Israel, will become God's grace to all the world. God's people are found far beyond Israel itself, for God is at work to transform all humanity and the societies created by humanity everywhere throughout the world.

The Old Testament lesson then ends with well-known words. “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. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (55:6-9).

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.

All it requires to access that grace on the part of people and of the institutions of society is for those people and systems to “seek the Lord”, to “call upon God”, to “forsake their (former) ways and thoughts”, to “return to the Lord”. If they so choose to act, then Yahweh will “have mercy on them” and will “abundantly pardon” them. God wants to forgive them. All that they need to do is to accept that already-proffered forgiveness and restitution!

Why is God a god of grace, acting with such compassion to all the world? “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (vss. 8-9). God's whole embrace of grace as the underlying premise of God's very being in relationship to humanity exceeds and even defies all human imagination (cf. 64:4; Rom. 11:33; I Cor. 2:9; Eph. 3:20). Grace permeates the very being of God. We cannot conceive of any human being or any entity so grace-centered and grace-dominated. But this is who Yahweh is. And this is what our God yearns for each human and all human society to discover and embrace for themselves!

Psalm 63:1-8 deals with the comfort and assurance the psalmist feels when he is in God's presence.

“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. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love (*chesedh*) is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name” (63:1-4).

Sensing the presence of God, and rejoicing in that presence gives to the Psalmist a sense of peace and fulfillment. Having a relationship with God is like “a rich feast” which satisfies the soul. The psalmist feels protected “in the shadow of (God's) wings,” because he is aware of God's *chesedh* (“steadfast love”) which is always there for him and for all who depend upon God. Thus the Psalmist declares, “My soul clings to you, for your right hand upholds me” (vs. 8).

It is particularly worth noting that the Psalmist makes clear that such satisfaction and protection in a relationship with God has not come about because of the Psalmist' doing. In fact, the Psalmist “seeks”, “thirsts”, “faints”, “searches” for God, but is helpless to find God as a result of his own initiative. If the Psalmist is at rest in a relationship with God, it is because of God's doing, not his! It is God's *chesedh* (here translated, “steadfast love”) that has initiated the relationship with the Psalmist, not the opposite. *Chesedh* is God's grace-filled love for us that occurs simply because God loves us, and not because of anything we have done to deserve such love. *Chesedh* is the Old Testament equivalent to the New Testament doctrine of grace! Thus it

is, the Psalmist has made clear, that this psalm provides for us a vivid picture of what it is like to live in the continuing presence of God – an abiding in God that is at God’s initiative, and not at ours.

Those of a sentimentalized faith would wish that the psalm would end here. But it doesn’t. And it is important that it doesn’t. Here is how the Psalm ends.

“But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth; they shall be given over to the power of the sword, they shall be prey for jackals. But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped” (63:9-11)!

Sometimes, the clearly-intentional sanitizing of the scripture that is replete throughout the lectionary gets very annoying. That is the case in this psalm. It is as if those selecting the scriptures that make up the lectionary can’t stand to have anything in it that gets to the guts and harsh reality of life and human society, but must always be sugar-coated! By choosing to end this psalm at its eighth verse rather than having it read through its actual close – vs. 11 – is another example of the emasculating of scripture. But let it say what it says! Don’t try to sugar-coat it. Be honest and frank instead – warts and all!

The Psalmist does not end his psalm by saying “I take rest and comfort in God because God has acted to sustain me in a loving relationship with him. I can be at peace with God because God is my peace.” Instead, he ends the psalm by saying, “I live at peace with God because God is my peace – and woe betides the one who disrupts that peace. He will go to Hell!!!” The psalm becomes imprecatory at the end, heaping invective upon those who would “destroy my life” and the Psalmist’s relationship with God. As far as this Psalmist is concerned, may such a person “go down into the depths of the earth (that is, into Sheol or Hell), they shall be prey for jackals”.

Don’t mess with this peaceful psalmist! And don’t mess with God’s people. If you act to foster injustice, exploitation or domination, if you seek to disrupt the “shalom” of Jerusalem – you will pay for it. Don’t rouse a sleeping lion! So it is that the psalmist ends his psalm stating that not only will he wreck vengeance on those who disturb his oneness with God and with Israel, but the king, as well, will act to bring retribution for those who seek to disturb the “body politic”. It is the king’s responsibility to be sure that the shalom community is being lived out through the administration of justice in the nation’s political order, the sharing of wealth within its economic order and the nurturing of each Israelite’s life and all of Israel in a relationship with God. And woe betides either the individual or the nation that seeks to destroy the people’s shalom! And **that** is the “hard core” of biblical reality – not the “twittering birds” of love and sweetness and light!

Luke 13:1-9 signals a major transition in the Gospel of Luke. Luke 9:51—18:14 is peculiar to Luke, not appearing in any of the other three gospels (although there are similar sayings that do appear in the other gospels). But these parables are not found elsewhere in the other gospel accounts – and that includes the parable that is contained in our New Testament lesson for today – the parable of the barren fig tree.

Although Jesus continues his criticism of Israel's systems, Luke 13 begins a shift in emphasis running through Luke 19 in which Jesus concentrates on describing a society that is God's alternative to the society managed by the priests, pharisees, Sadducees and scribes for their own profit and pleasure. This new society Jesus calls "the kingdom of God". That "kingdom", in Jesus' description of it, bears marked resemblance to the society God intends as it is described in Deuteronomy.

The shift is introduced by Jesus' commentary on two recent events in Israel. "At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did" (13:1-5).

We do not know about these two events to which Jesus referred. But, apparently, the collapse of a tower killed eighteen Jews. And Pilate must have slaughtered some Galileans who had gathered for worship at the Temple. The reason for that slaughter is not given (for example, that they were speaking rebelliously or somehow threatened the peace and security of Jerusalem), but that it occurred at all was an unimaginable offense to all Jews, no matter its justification.

Jesus does not comment at all about the events themselves. Instead, what he concentrates upon is the theological interpretation the Jewish establishment gave to these events. The Jewish religious leaders taught that disaster that befell people was a sign that they had sinned grievously against the Law (e.g., see John 9:1-2), a classic case of "blaming the victim". This interpretation, of course, freed the Jewish religious/political establishment of any blame for the disaster or of assuming any responsibility. In these cases, for example, the Jewish leadership could claim that it was the personal sins of these Jews that brought disaster upon them, so that the Jewish leadership could not be held accountable for allowing shoddy construction to contribute to the collapse of a tower or for having to challenge Pilate regarding his political decisions.

What Jesus does is to thoroughly destroy the Jewish leadership's argument that it was the people's sins that caused their own deaths. Instead, he argues that the clear indication of scripture is that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Those who died in these two disasters were no "worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem". In a profound sense, they were just unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Thus, Jesus concludes, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did" (13:5). The circumstances of your demise may be different, but all of us must die. God's grace, in other words, is offered equally to all people. Thus, the grace of God's intentions for the world spiritually, politically and economically is offered to all human society. But whether that grace becomes operative either in us or in our society depends upon our response. It becomes incumbent upon all of us to repent of our greed, lust for power and our need to be dominant, to embrace the shalom of God, and thus become a transformed people living as God intended all humanity to live.

The conclusion that Jesus draws in this story then leads to the parable that he then tells.

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” The gardener replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down”” (13:6-9).

This parable is difficult to interpret unless one realizes that Jesus has used in it several symbols that would immediately communicate to first-century Jews. First, both a fig tree and a vineyard were popular symbols for Israel. Second, in several parables Jesus uses the symbol of the owner of a vineyard as being God and the symbol of a gardener for himself. Third, a vineyard was seen as the most fertile soil in which a fig tree could grow (because it was frequently worked and fertilized in order to be productive as a vineyard), and a three-year old tree would indicate a mature tree that should have reached its zenith of production. Knowing all these facts (as any Jew would have known them) brings immediate sense to this parable.

This is a parable of grace – a parable about how God refuses to give up on humans and on God’s dream for human society. The barren fig tree can be likened to a barren Israel, abandoning its Deuteronomic vision and commitment to building the shalom community of Jubilee justice, and instead settling for social systems accruing wealth, power and prestige for a chosen select group (the priests, Pharisees and Sadducees) while controlling, exploiting and oppressing the majority of the people through their religious convictions. The owner, God, is almost ready to give up both on Israel and on God’s dream for a shalom-centered social order. But the gardener, Jesus, begs for time to try once again to bring about transformation in the systems that have previously refused to repent. And God, who can simply not give up on his people, gives Jesus permission to try again.

God does not easily give up God’s dream for us and for our societies. In this case, hundreds of years of oppressive performance on the part of Israel’s powerful declare that they will not change. But God, through Christ, says, “Just one more effort! Just one more time!”

This parable would suggest that, at least in Luke, Jesus moves reluctantly into the proclamation of the kingdom of God. The initial emphasis of Jesus, as manifested in his statement of his call (4:18-19) and the clues given to the reader in the songs of Mary, Zechariah, the angel witness and Simeon (1:47-56; 1:68-79; 2:10-14 and 2:29-32 respectively), is to seek the repentance of Israel’s leaders and systems so that they might become, in fact and function what they had been called for over a millennium to be – God’s shalom kingdom on earth. But the weight of Luke 3-12 is that such is not about to happen. The systems, committed to their control and dominance of the people and the accumulation of their wealth and power that results from such dominance, reject all efforts by Jesus for their reform. There is no intention on their part to change even one iota of the arrangement that has benefited them so well for so long. So it is that Jesus begins to proclaim the birthing of an alternate system – the kingdom of God among those who will embrace it for their lives and their society (whether Jew or Gentile). And in these latter chapters of Luke, Jesus describes that kingdom and explores how that new order of God’s will be activated in human society until it eventually overwhelms that society.

But, one more time! One more effort! God's grace doesn't give up easily. Try again. Proclaim one more time to priest and people alike, wealthy and impoverished alike, ruler and ruled alike the vision of God's intentions for humanity. And perhaps – just perhaps, they may finally hear and embrace that vision!

So, try one more time! One more time! God doesn't easily give up on the transformation of society. And God doesn't easily give up on the transformation of us, as well. And that, indeed, is good news!

I Corinthians 10:1-13 is an intriguing passage in which Paul likens the spiritual journey of Christians to the exodus experience of Israel. Our faith, also, is a journey from “Egyptian slavery” to arrival in the “Promised Land”! Paul uses the exodus story as a reminder to the Corinthian Christians of the pitfalls that await all of us in our journey of faith.

“I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness” (10:1-5).

Like the Corinthian Christians, Paul writes, the early Israelites went through a spiritual exodus that was part-and-parcel of their physical exodus. It was a cloud that led them through the wilderness (Exod. 13:21; Ps. 105:39), and it was their passage through the Red Sea that delivered them from the power of pharaoh (Exod. 14:22). So it was that God led each of us to confess Christ as Lord and, through the waters of baptism, we both confessed Christ as Lord and were sanctified for faith through him. Like the Israelites, we Christians receive “spiritual food” (manna – see Exod. 16:4, 35; Deut. 8:3) in the sacrament of the Eucharist, and drink “spiritual drink” (life-giving water mysteriously coming from the rock – see Exod. 17:6; Num. 20:7-11) in the wine of the sacrament.

Israel was saved from certain death in the desert by the rock that gave water (Exod. 16:4, 35); thus, we are continuously saved from certain spiritual death by the Rock, Christ Jesus. That rock “followed them” (see Ps. 78:15-16; apparently, the supply of water from a rock occurred several times in their wilderness wanderings – cf. Exod. 17:1-6; Num. 20:2-13; so it was as if the rock of God's salvation was “following them”). Likewise, we Christians believe that it is Jesus who is our Rock who goes with us wherever we may go in living out our Christian faith.

“Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness” (vs. 5). Although Israel had these continuous signs of God's liberating love for them (deliverance from the plagues and Egyptian slavery, rescue at the Red Sea, a pillar of cloud to guide them throughout their wilderness wanderings, the Law given at Mount Sinai, the provision of manna and of water throughout their journey), yet most of them doubted God and rebelled against Moses over and over again. They rebelled to such an extent that most of them had to die

in the wilderness, and a new generation hardened by the wilderness had to grow up before Israel was ready to enter the Promised Land.

Their sin fell into several categories. They became idolaters, worshipping the Golden Calf (Exod. 32:1-6, 19). They acted immorally, including sexual immorality at the time of the worship of the Golden Calf. They rebelled against God and Moses, and put God to the test (Deut. 1:26-27). The result of their rebellious actions was God's corrective action against them, time and time again (Num. 21:6; Exod. 12:23; II Sam. 24:16; I Chr. 21:15; Wis. 18:20-25).

So it is that the Corinthian Christians frequently disobey God (the entirety of Paul's two letters to the Corinthian Christians was about their rebelliousness against God's demands upon them and their lack of commitment and compassion toward each other, along with a severe party spirit). Like Israel, therefore, they too can be "destroyed". Therefore, learn from the Israelites and act accordingly (vss. 11-12).

Paul then concludes his admonition with the well-known verse: "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it" (10:13).

On the face of it, Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians that God will not allow any temptation beyond their capacity to cope with that temptation, but instead will be faithful to them so that they can endure. But, on the other hand, Paul is presenting an implicit rebuke to them. Since God keeps us from temptation beyond our capacity to endure, we can't use our temptations as an excuse for giving in to them ("the Devil made me do it"). We are responsible for the actions that we take. And there is therefore never a reason for yielding to the temptations with which we are faced. So what first appears to be good news to us (we won't be tempted beyond our ability to resist) is also demand upon us (yielding to temptation is never acceptable for a Christian).

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