

Rev. Robert W. Brown

Isaiah 55:1-6a

The Invitation

SCRIPTURE READING

Isaiah 55:1-6a

“Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has 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 diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,
and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.
“Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near.

SERMON

Ever-present God of grace and hope, we hear your invitation to come to the waters. Yet, I confess that it is often hard to live in the glorious reality of Your promises. The seductive forces of my indignation at injustices, my willingness to find blame and the defenses of cynicism all diminish my hope and challenge my faith. I ask that You stir our hearts this day. May the Holy Spirit of the Living God strengthen our weary and easily seduced souls. In this time of isolated confusion and disorientation, may Your Word give us insight, understanding and renewed hope. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to You, our rock and our redeemer. AMEN

At the time that the prophet Isaiah first voiced these words from God to the nation of Israel, the chosen people really needed to hear God's compassionate invitation. They were in a fearful decline. Years ago, under King David's rule, Israel had been strong and prosperous. Their very identity and purpose were inextricably bound in the Hebrew scripture, the Mosaic Law and their religious practice.

No one lacked for anything and, for the most part, people felt safe, secure and grateful. But in time, a familiar pattern that we see time and time again throughout history emerged in the Holy Land. The rich began to use their power to subjugate the poor. Civility and mutuality began to erode, devolving into bitterly opposed factions. There were those who wanted to preserve their power and increase their wealth, and those who strongly resisted the intentional exploitation and systemic oppression of the poor and vulnerable. Also, the high priests & other influential religious leaders began to compromise the ethical codes and teachings of the Torah. The very laws that were the organizing principle of a moral, generous, & thriving society were diluted to the point of irrelevance. Scriptures were twisted to justify unscrupulous and cruel behaviors.

Eventually a civil war split the Israelites into two nations. The north remained the nation of Israel and south was called Judah. The internal conflict and moral ambiguity led to a distracted and self-absorbed people. They were so blinded that they couldn't even see the monster just outside the gates. Powerful empires were armed and ready to pounce.

The prophet, however does see what's happening. (After all, that's the job description of a prophet.)

Isaiah is certain that destruction, death and defeat will be the only outcome for BOTH nations if this selfish & cruel way of life continues. He warns both North and South of their inevitable demise. THEN, he shows them a way out; God's open-armed invitation to return to their former ways and reclaim their primary identity as God's beloved. "Come. Come to me." God says, "Hear, that your soul may live." This extraordinary, divine invitation echoes through time. But who today is opening this cosmic paperless post? (Check your email!) Who today might respond to this wildly generous offer?

Yesterday I spoke with my friend and colleague in Zimbabwe. The Reverend Fungayi Mutsumbei is a longtime friend of TriCon Church too. He said that even before the pandemic crossed the border, the nation of Zimbabwe was teetering on the edge of utter collapse. And today... at this very hour...the entire country struggles to find a way to simply survive the next 24 hours. Unemployment numbers soar daily. Rampant inflation continues to weakened an already flimsy economy. The cost of basic goods has risen more than 70-fold.

Fungayi told me that today a packet of sugar costs 300 of their anemic dollars. A single loaf of bread, he says, sells for \$80. Basic food and ordinary household supplies are now way beyond the reach of ordinary people. Zimbabwe's entire infrastructure is in ruins. Electricity is spotty at best. Running water is a luxury even for the affluent. And even as these meager living conditions continue to deteriorate, the healthcare system has completely fallen apart. In July, as COVID cases spread like wild fire through the

beleaguered nation, nurses and doctors refused to attend to the sick for fear that they too would die without the necessary protections and lack of proper equipment to treat the sick and infected. Many physicians fled the nation.

For Fungayi, and so many others who trust God's word, God's invitation has been received. For those who truly trust in God, this is like being invited to the royal wedding! Hour by hour; day by day they reread the invitation with eager anticipation; you're invited!

Even now, hope is kept alive through the living water of the Spirit. The invitation echoes through time. "Come," God beckons, "everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and the one who has no money, come, buy and eat!" Imagine what that sounds like to the believers in Zimbabwe!

From ancient Israel to modern day Zimbabwe, the invitation is given to all who thirst. Rich food is offered to anyone who is hungry. Money, power, privilege and position are all worthless at this celestial banquet. The only currency there is - is a hunger and thirst to live joyously together in the presence of God. Borders are dismantled, factions are reunited, and there is truly a healing of the nations. Can you imagine this kind of world?

What are you thirsty for? Is it the "living water" that Jesus offered the poor outcast woman at the well? Jesus said, "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹

This is Fungayi's daily refreshment. Honestly, God's invitation!

Are you hungry for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven? The invitation is to join the great feast, where the captives of tyrants are set free, immigrant families are reunited and refugees at last find sanctuary. At this table, systemic poverty is utterly abolished because money itself has lost all its power and value. This is a world where neither conservative or liberal can claim the higher moral ground. A world where everyone who thirsts can find pure, clean, living water and every soul may live.

This is the good news of the Gospel; God's invitation is for absolutely everyone and will never be rescinded, restricted or conditional! All we need do is say yes and show up at the table; take, eat and drink without cost. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is a sacred re-creation of that great feast. In receiving communion, we say yes to God's invitation. The bread and cup offered here is a foretaste of our "AT-ONE-MENT" with God and all people. So, let us respond to God's invitation. Let us say yes together as we eat this bread and drink this cup. Even now, the kingdom of God is at hand. Amen.

¹ John 4:10-14