

December 15, 2013

Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 55:1-11

Let anyone who is thirsty come to the waters; God's word will not return empty

(John 4:13-14, Jesus promises the gift of living water to those who thirst)

The text:

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. 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.

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. For 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. [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.]

Questions for Reflection:

1. As the commentary points out, this poem (or song, as it does have an almost musical quality) originates from the time of late exile in Babylon, when God's people began to see the tide of world events turning in their favor. In your own life, do you tend to look for and find evidence of God's hand in the mundane political happenings of the world? Why or why not?
2. The first verses of this song contain intriguing paradoxes, such as the invitation to "buy" something addressed to those who have "no money." What is the poet trying to communicate by these apparent contradictions?
3. The commentary highlights the immediacy or urgency of the prophet's invitation (Come... *now!*), and mentions also the historical fact that many Jews chose instead to remain in Babylon. What do you think you would have done? Can you think of similar circumstances in modern life when the people of God are called to respond *quickly* to the word of God? What causes people to drag their feet?

4. How do you feel about the inscrutability of God's ways in the world? Is it easier or harder to worship One whose thoughts and ways are higher than yours?

Commentary from:

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1821

By Corrine Carvalho

When Cardinal Bergoglio, a Jesuit priest from South America, was elected Pope last year, many Roman Catholics were shocked that something so unexpected had occurred.

In a similar way, many people around the world were amazed when the United States elected an African-American, Barack Obama, to be President. Sometimes, just when you get used to the idea that "there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9), something unprecedented happens.

The writer of this particular poem felt the same kind of shock at an unexpected, but fortuitous turn of events. This poem was written towards the end of the Babylonian Exile and contains the profound joy felt by those who saw God's work in the international politics of their day.

At the time that the poem was written, the elite of Judah had been in exile for a little more than two generations. The targets of this oracle were the grandchildren of those who had been forcibly exiled when Jerusalem had fallen in 586 BCE. They had kept their identity as Jews telling stories to their children and grandchildren of the glory that had been Jerusalem.

By 538 BCE, however, Babylon had been conquered by the Persians. The Persian king, Cyrus, allowed the peoples whom the Babylonians had exiled to return to their homelands. In some cases, he even funded their return.

Isaiah 40-55, which scholars refer to as Second Isaiah, contains poems celebrating Cyrus. In fact, in Isaiah 45:1, he is even called a "messiah," meaning a king anointed by God to carry out God's plans. The author of Second Isaiah firmly holds that the only possible explanation for such an unprecedented turn of events was that Yahweh was in control of all of human history. Many of the poems in this section depict the imminent return of the exiles as a new Exodus which ushers in a new creation.

Chapter 55 recapitulates many themes found in the preceding chapters. Because it is a summary of the earlier poems, it is not as cohesive as other poems in this section. It begins with the imagery of food and drink (verses 1-2) and moves on to the restoration of the Davidic line (3-5). The poem then exhorts the audience to seek God (6-7), ending with a reflection on the unknown of God (8-11). The

language is powerful, evidenced by the number of contemporary worship songs that use phrases from this poem.

Lurking behind this text is the reality that many Jews living in Babylon at the time did not choose to return to Jerusalem. Recent archaeological finds provide evidence that by 538, the Jewish community had been integrated into Babylonian society. They had jobs, owned homes, and even lent money to others. Under the Babylonians and Persians, they were free to worship Yahweh, and suffered no coercion to recognize Babylonian gods. Furthermore, the cities within Mesopotamia were the financial, commercial, and cultural centers of that part of the ancient world.

In contrast, Jerusalem was in ruins. Those who returned would first have to stake their claims to land in the area. Many of the fields immediately surrounding Jerusalem had gone uncultivated. There was only a small settlement where the city had once stood, so they would have had to build houses, city walls -- in fact, the whole infrastructure. Without the restoration of the monarchy, there were no prestigious jobs for skilled laborers. It was not an attractive prospect for a generation who had no personal experience of the old city.

Much of Isaiah 40-55 is an exhortation to this community to return. The poems promise that God will cause even the desert to bloom if they return. Chapter 55 can be read as the poet's final exhortation. The poem begins by contrasting real food, with a promise of something better. Real food (which does not satisfy) is akin to any tangible wealth: money, luxury goods, financial security, etc. Verses 1-2 exhort the people to recognize that the tangible wealth that they enjoy in Babylon is nothing compared to the rewards God has in store if they return.

At this point in Israel's history, many people still hoped for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, a wish seen in verses 3-5. Throughout the ancient Near East, the reign of an ideal king is associated with fertility and, therefore, an abundance of food. This poem inverts the normal order of king and food. It starts with the image of satiety, and from there infers the restoration of a glorious king.

Verse 6 begins a clear exhortation. "Seek the Lord while he may be found," implying that if one does not immediately seek God, Yahweh will not be found at some later date, such as after the city has been rebuilt. The time to return in order to enjoy God's blessings is now.

The poem ends with their experience of God. For this audience, God's ways are surprising and, ultimately, unknowable. In most other Old Testament texts, the notion of God's unpredictability is linked to tragic events. Here, however, that unknown is tied to a joyful occasion, which was perhaps even more

unpredictable than the original defeat.

The final verse probably refers to God's covenants with Israel. God has sworn to those covenants, especially the covenant with David, referred to in verse 3. The exiles' hopes rested in God's fidelity to that covenant. Israel would be restored, not for their sake, but to show the world that God is in control of history.

Isaiah 55 was written at time when people felt anything was possible. They had not yet experienced the disappointment of a monarchy that is never restored. They had not yet felt the drought in the days of Haggai or the internal strife that stopped the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra. This is the voice that reminds us that, although things do not always turn out like we plan, sometimes, just sometimes, they turn out wildly better.