

## ***Come to the Waters***

Isaiah 55

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When Isaiah chapter 55 was written, the Israelites were living in exile in Babylon. They were dislocated from their home and their temple in Jerusalem. They were disconnected from the promises of favor God made to Abraham and Moses and David. They were distanced, so it felt, from God. So they began to turn away from their callings and identity as people of Yahweh. At THIS time came a word from the Lord.

### **Isaiah 55 (NRSV)**

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.  
2Why do you spend your money for that which is not  
bread,  
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.  
3Incline 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.  
4See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
a leader and commander for the peoples.  
5See, 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.  
  
6Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;  
7let 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.  
8For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
9For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

10For 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,  
11so 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.

12For 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.  
13Instead 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.

One Sunday at a hospital, I found myself leading a worship service for patients. I had deliberately planned a reformed worship service, not unlike the one we're experiencing today, and entered into the liturgy by introducing myself to the group and saying an opening prayer. During the prayer, I became uneasy about the pleasant woman across the table from me was not bowing her head or closing her eyes, like everyone else. And as I was finishing the prayer, something like, "thank you Lord for this day, in your holy name..." when this woman I'd learn to call Penny interrupted me, "Excuse me, Chaplain, but I wanted to know if there will be a chance to ask... you know, questions." There was no space for this in the reformed worship liturgy I brought. All I could think to do was say, "of course," and hope that I knew enough about whatever bible story or worship element to be able to answer her. And so she continued, "My question is this, what if I start to feel like it is easier not to exist, than it is to exist? You see, I've been through some things," said Penny, "some... things, and I'm struggling here, feels like all alone."

A word came from the Lord to Isaiah, addressed to all you who are thirsty. All you who are thirsty, all you who are struggling just to exist, all you who are struggling with health, with money, with identity, and with God, all YOU who are thirsty, addresses the prophet. These authors of our faith also knew that our universal instinct to thirst for water is a near perfect metaphor for an instinct we have in our spirit life. If we venture deep inside ourselves, into the foggy places where our fears and angers and joys and hopes live, these things that drive us to be who we are, we come upon another part of our being that can dry up if left untended, leaving us so thirsty. Thirsty in the soul.

Thirsters, come to the WATERS, says the Lord, come and drink! These are soul waters, says Isaiah, which we drink not with our lips, but with our ears. Incline your ear to me, says the Lord, listen so that you may live. My word shall nourish you who are thirsty, like desert plants, and instead sprout forth from you abundance and flourishing, like that of the cypress and myrtle. These waters, the Lord reveals, are God's eternal word for us.

God's word, which at the dawn of everything created light and life, set in motion God's purpose, a purpose that would be revealed in covenant promises to Abraham and Moses and David, promising to bless and restore and make great the people. God's ancient word attested in the scriptures of our ancestors, by which we come to understand ourselves as blessed children of God. But my word is not just an ancient word, says the Lord, delivered to people you never knew, my word is a present and living word, poured out for you and everyone.

We hear God's invitation to come to the waters, and it appears as an invitation to a pool of water, a river, a lake, an oasis, at the edge of which we may kneel, cup our hands, and drink. The gathered waters are our scriptures, ancient witnesses to God's activity in the world, clarifying who and whose we are, and summoning us to live as beloved children called to be a blessing. We come to these waters each week in worship, to hear another word from God, the truth about things, and to let our thirsty souls be satisfied with the promise of a God who never leaves us.

But as we approach the pool of holy waters, to kneel for a drink, we must always be reminded that every source of gathered water reminds us that it rains. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. We receive God's Word through the Spirit that lives all around us, and in us, which affirms the quenching Word we receive in scripture. Scripture is the gift we receive so that we might be more attuned to the Living Word. Once you believe God is with us you may see glimmers of how true it is all the time, even in our exile, in our struggles, in our disconnectedness. This Living Word is everywhere, and often comes up in unsuspecting times and places for each of us, in the form of small good things.

I made the holy mistake this week of doing some preparation for this worship, and this sermon, in the presence of my two children, Matthew and Anna Jean. As I reflected on the depths of God's eternal Word, the waters for our thirsty souls, I became distracted by the singing and the ranting of our two willful offspring. The harder they tried to be annoying, the harder I tried to focus, on words on a page, on theological concepts, and on God in heaven who promised to the people deliverance. The kids began to climb on top of me, pushing my laptop to the side, one child in front and one child clinging to my back, forming a Daddy-Pastor sandwich. "I see you!" "I see you, Dada!" "Where's Matthew?" "Where's Peepee?" (That's almost-two-year-old for "Sweet Pea.")

All you who are thirsty, come to the waters, says the Lord, the waters of my Word, come down from heaven to water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, joy and peace. And every time you come to kneel at the pool, remember too that sometimes it rains. Thanks be to God.