

“My Thoughts Are Not Your Thoughts”

Meditation on Isaiah 55

Feb. 28, 2016

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

*“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.*

I am enjoying winter in Florida! It's still winter, right? No one really asks me anymore if I miss the snow. Just in case you are wondering -- no, not really, though it is beautiful in rural Minnesota in winter--when you are inside looking out, the sun is shining, and it's white all around.

I ran across one of my messages this week from Isaiah 55 that I preached to my last congregation in March 2013--and it made me smile! I don't re-use sermons, but I do keep my old ones, just to make sure that I am not always preaching on the same scriptures and saying the same things! My message from 2013 started like this, "Jim and I are still trying to get acclimated to Minnesota winters. Exactly when does winter begin? And when does it end? The snow comes whenever it wants. It doesn't look at the calendar and say, "Oh, today is the first day of spring. Time to go." Jim and I, at the time, were in our second winter there. The first one turned out to be one of the mildest on record for the area. But the winter of 2013 was *fierce*. Even the Minnesotans were complaining

about snow and ice--and yearning for spring. I was dreaming of warmer weather and summer vacations. Here's some of what I wrote:

“The other day, I stepped out my door and the wind blowing across the fields sounded just like the ocean! I remembered going to the beach as a child. I think the memory was a gift from God. As if the Lord were saying, ‘Be patient. Winter won’t last forever.’ It lightened my burden to think about my many peaceful walks on the shore. I remembered how the ocean changes color with the light and hues of the sky. And how the Atlantic is a murky greenish-brown--not the deep blue that children use when they color a crayon sea. But the sound of the ocean is my most vivid memory. It’s a wild, natural noise. Loud, like the roar of a lion, so that if you try to shout to someone a little ways off, your voice is a whisper in the wind.

“When I stand and gaze at the ocean, I feel very small, as it seems to go on and on. But at the same time, I feel safe and secure. The ocean reminds me of our Creator--and how I am always in His presence, no matter where I go. I am comforted that He has plans, purposes and ideas that are so much bigger than you or I can dream....”

I had no idea, of course, that I would move to Merritt Island to serve the Lord and a new flock in 2015. I wasn’t looking for a new call, back then. If someone had told me that this was what my life would be, I am not sure that I would have believed it! In March 2013, it felt like winter would never end...

Now, when I see the ocean, I am amazed at how quickly my life can change. And how very important it is to look back and remember all the

wonderful things that God has done. And trust Him for the things I cannot understand.

God's people struggled to keep the faith when their Holy City and temple were destroyed, and they were exiled to Babylon in 586-7 B.C.E. I wonder if they believed him when Second Isaiah, author of chapters 40-66, told them in 43:19 to prepare for "a new thing" the Lord was about to do. This Isaiah, writing between 550 BCE and 515 BCE, assured the exiles that God would bring about their release from captivity and lead them home. Then it happens! In 538 B.C.E., King Cyrus allows the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem, a city in ruins, and rebuild their temple, but it takes years and many trials to overcome. Isaiah speaks to a people grown bitter from their profound loss and hardships. They believe God has abandoned them. Isaiah assures them that God still has a plan and that the hardships they have endured have made them stronger, more fit to accomplish God's purposes. They must be surprised to learn that the Lord wants them to extend the witness of God's reign far beyond their own borders--to the ends of the earth!

Isaiah 55 begins, "Ho, *everyone* who thirsts!" That means *everyone* who needs water to live. The word translated "Ho" can convey lament, such as "woe" or "alas"--or it can be a way of hailing people, including strangers on the street. "Hey, you!" or "You, there!" The invitation to come and drink water, wine and milk without paying is much like the invitation of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 9, who invites the "simple" to a

similar banquet. "Leave your simple ways," she says in Proverbs 9:6, "and live, and walk in the way of insight." Beckoning the thirsty stirs memories of God's provision for Israel in the wilderness. Water is also symbolic of the Spirit of God, as in Isaiah 44:3, "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants."

Isaiah urges God's people to labor only for bread and that which "satisfies." This makes me think of that line in *The Lord's Prayer*, "Give us this day our daily bread" --a reminder that everything we have, even our food, is a gift from the Lord! This kind of labor of which Isaiah speaks-- the labor that satisfies -- isn't a regular job to earn money; it's a spiritual work--serving the Lord. Additionally, bread is symbolic of God's Word in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New, as he says in John 6:33, "*For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*"

The most powerful message of this passage, I believe, is just before the promise of joy and peace for God's people --when God's Kingdom comes to fruition and Creation is renewed. When mountains and hills burst into song and the trees of the field clap their hands. God, speaking through Isaiah, says, "*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.*" The Hebrew word translated *thoughts* (*mahsebot*) contains the idea of *calculations, devices or plans*. Human *mahsebot*--plans or schemes in the Bible are often characterized by sinful deviance, such as Gen. 6:5, when "The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human

race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” ; or stubborn resistance to God (as in Jer. 18:12) or a misguided sense of self-sufficiency, such as in Isaiah 65:2: “All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations.”

Isaiah’s point is that God’s people, like all human beings, are sinful creatures, in need of God’s redeeming. Isaiah knows this all too well. How many times does he say, “listen” to a people who don’t want to hear? Three times in this one passage! “*Listen carefully to me,*” he says. “*Incline your ear, and come to me.*” “*Listen, so that you may live.*”

Here is another important point. When Isaiah speaks of the wicked, he isn’t talking about the idol worshiping neighbors with which the Jewish people are living. He is talking about God’s own people who have adopted the idol-worshiping ways of their neighbors. And as I study this passage, I realize that our gracious God is talking *to all of us!*

Isaiah says, “*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.*”

May you remember, friends, as you leave this place how God waits and longs for us to come to him and drink deeply of His Spirit! May you be stirred to labor, hunger and thirst for the things of God, for these are what will satisfy. And I hope that when you see the ocean, as you often do, that you, too, will be amazed at how quickly your life can change, how very important it is to look back and remember all the wonderful

things God has done, and to trust Him for the things you cannot understand.

Let us pray.

Holy One, we come to you now, people who thirst for your Spirit and hunger for your righteous Kingdom come to fruition, all Creation renewed. Thank you for your love and faithfulness to us, for all the wonderful things you have done. Help us, Lord, to put away the idols in our lives, the things that we love too much, and seek your abundant mercy and grace. Lead us to put you first in our lives, to humbly serve you every day, and to labor for the things that matter for all eternity, the things that will satisfy our souls. In Christ we pray. Amen.