

“Come to the Waters”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Third Sunday of Lent – March 3, 2013

Isaiah 55: 1-9

When do you find yourself most empty? When you're physically tired – from illness, work, or stress? When you're emotionally drained – from family concerns, strained friendships, or worry and anxiety for yourself or others? When you're spiritually spent – from struggling to understand why God allows trials and tribulations to happen to you, to loved ones, to innocent human beings?

What do you do to fill the emptiness? Do you fill the emptiness with meaningful relationships? Do you fill the emptiness with material possessions and comforts? Do you fill the emptiness with behavior or habits which are destructive, either to yourself or to those who love you?

There is much which causes emptiness in our lives, and there are many ways we seek to fill the emptiness. As Darryl Trimiew says, where we seek fulfillment in our emptiness says much about our sense of dependence on God.

In the modern world, even on Sunday, even in Lent, people crave satisfaction. Perched alertly and anxiously on their pews, the devout seek a word from the Lord. We seek God's face. Afterwards we will rush out to Sunday brunches or loll around poolside regrouping, re-creating, and re-composing ourselves after the helter-skelter hustle of the weekday. All week we have worked and struggled, compromised and sought approval, earning our sustenance and paychecks from a world of competition. All week we have done what was necessary to buy what we need and to produce what is demanded of us. We try to please those over us so we may obtain what we need, what we believe will give us satisfaction. Yet on Sunday we find ourselves spent, drained, and still thirsting for more.

Perhaps Isaiah received this word from God after visiting a market. Even without mass media, the ancient market square was busy with commerce, with people rushing to buy, struggling to sell, and some, with no assets at all, standing at the margins, perhaps begging for a handout so that they too might taste their daily bread.

*Like Isaiah we are all finite creatures beset with daily needs. Never are we free from want. Even in the Lord's Prayer we ask, "Give us this day our daily bread." God could have created us without these needs, without these drives, but God did not. God wants us to depend on him (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 74-76*).*

Throughout this passage, we hear the Lord speaking to his people, and right from the start, it is an invitation to fill the emptiness with what the Lord is providing: "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" (55:1). The Lord is encouraging them to "incline [their] ear, and come to me" (55:3). The Lord calls on them to eat, drink, and be filled with what he has to provide, instead of spending money on things which do not satisfy them (55:2). The Lord will make an everlasting covenant with his people, and will restore the fortunes of the people of David, who was their witness of God's might and glory. The prophet interjects himself in verses 6-7, almost reminding the people of the urgency of this moment: "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them."

Daniel Debevoise writes: *Isaiah's offer is unlike anything we know or practice. In his vision, everyone who is thirsty gets water. Everyone who is hungry is invited to eat: buy milk and wine without money! It is like a grocery store where everything is free. In this supermarket, all the people who stand by the side of the road with little cardboard signs that say, "Will work for food," are pushing carts full of groceries through the checkout lines, paying only with a smile and a wave.*

In contrast to what is available for free, Isaiah says we are paying for things we do not need in the first place - spending money on what is not bread and laboring for what does not satisfy us. Isaiah says we need a new diet of good and rich food.

Have you ever gone to visit someone at home and as soon as you sit down in the living room your host offers you something to drink? Your answer may be based not on whether you are thirsty but on how long you want to stay. Even if you decline, your host may persist.

In this passage, Isaiah leans across the coffee table and says, "Hey. Stop it. Whether or not you are thirsty, whether or not you are hungry, you need what God has to give" (ibid).

To conclude the passage, we hear the Lord speaking again to his people, and reminding them what they need to worry about, and what they DON'T need to worry about. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" (55:8-9). It is the Israelites' reminder - and our reminder - that God knows what he is doing; our thoughts will never reach as high as the thoughts of our Creator. What we are called to do is to incline our ear to our Lord, and remain open to the Spirit's leading.

It can be hard to always believe that that compassion and hope can fill the painful emptiness in our lives. Loved ones who have died, relationships which have been broken or never developed, jobs which have failed to blossom into true fulfillment - these and so many other situations can weigh us down when we seek God's hope.

But that hope is real and present, if only we are open and willing to receive it. A comforting call from a friend. An offer to help from a neighbor. The collective prayers of the community of faith. The Spirit of the living God is present all around us, and we experience God's hope and promise by being still and knowing our God. Or, as the hymn, "Amazing Grace" says: "The Lord has promised good to me, His word my hope secures; He will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures" (John Newton, 1779, Hymn #280, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*).

We are always in need of feasting on God's Word. We are always in need of tasting the waters of hope and promise. We are always in need of replenishing our spiritual reservoirs with the life-giving Spirit. For if we are intentionally seeking God's grace each and every day, then we will be able to hear the prophet's words of hope when we are in desperate need.

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters and be filled with God's life-giving love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.