

On The Path: A Banquet of Grace©**Isaiah 55:1-9****March 3, 2018****Sharlyn Gates**

When I read this passage from Isaiah, I think of the Baby Pantry and the invitation offered to parents who are struggling.

Come! Come and buy what you need with no money. Come and receive a gift of immeasurable love and radical hospitality.

Of course, diapers and wipes are not quite the same thing as wine and milk and rich food, but it is the same principal, isn't it?

The Israelites had been in exile for over 50 years. The Babylonians had plundered their land, their homes, and had destroyed the temple. They had been carried off to a foreign land and were under the rule of a new government.

But now, after all this time, the king is telling them they are free; they are free to go home once again. They can leave Babylon and go back to Judah, their native country.

At first, we would think that must be a wonderful word to them! Good news! Free at last!

But, if you think about it, it was a frightening thing. Most of them could barely remember the old life, if they had any memory of it at all. Many of them were either very young when they were made captives, or they were born into captivity.

The Babylonian way of life had become their way of life. They had intermarried and had children. What would they do about that? In many ways, they felt they were at home, after all this time.

Yet, some of them did want to go. They knew that the life they had been living was not the life meant for them. They were a chosen people. They had a rich history, a covenant life with Yahweh.

They told the story over and over to their children and grandchildren – the story of Abraham and Sarah and the covenant God made with them – that they would have many descendants and that God would be their God.

And, the story of how God had sent Moses to rescue them from captivity and slavery in Egypt and all that happened in that rescue and in the wilderness as they wandered for years, waiting to enter into the Promised Land.

And of course, there was the renewal of the covenant with King David – God (Yahweh) promising that it would be an everlasting covenant – one that would never end; that old promise that they would be Gods people and He would be their God.

But, now that Promised Land, the Land of Milk and Honey, was but a memory. And for some the memory was simply because of hearing the story so often. And because of the story ... their story ... they felt the grief and longing for home, even if they weren't sure about leaving what was familiar. Even if they felt they were second-class citizens.

Of course, there is more to what they had felt than just fear of going home. They believed that they were in this foreign land because of God's judgment. Hadn't the prophets shouted that to them?

In fact, the first chapters of Isaiah were all about warning the Israelites (called Zion) about God's punishment and wrath for the way they had turned from him.

And now, suddenly, Isaiah is preaching a new tune. He is saying, not only are you free because the king said so, but you are free to go home because God says so.

And Isaiah says they – the people of Israel – will be a light to the nations and that people and other nations will come to them, will look to them for the light – for God.

But, we can imagine they might have been skeptical. They may have said to themselves “Yeah, right. How can poor, low class exiles be a light to any nation? And why would they come to us? And what about Jerusalem, the Holy City that was left in shambles?”

Before they were captives, they owned the land that God had given them. They owned their homes, their gardens, their vineyards and animals, their wells full of water – all was theirs to enjoy.

But in this strange place, even water had become a commodity for sale. Just as we see street vendors on the corners in the city, so did they. Vendors shouting things like “Water! Water! Get your water here!”

Only, of course, there was a price to pay. Same with food and everything they needed.

Truth be told, they were a people without much hope ... displaced, beaten down, second class. It was surely very difficult to really believe that they could be a light to the nations.

John C. Holbert writes in the Good Preacher Commentaries: “One can only imagine how ridiculous all of this high-flown talk was to the exiles in Babylon. Who are you kidding, Isaiah?”

If by some magic act we are able to return to our homeland, just how do you imagine that we will be able to create some sort of new community with peoples we do not even know and who do not know us?

And here is Isaiah's answer to that question and his answer to our questions when we imagine that God really cannot do anything new for us:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says YHWH. Just as the skies are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts (Is 55:8-9).

Our human thoughts have a very difficult time thinking largely enough to imagine how the world can become new. But God can and bids us to higher thought than we can ever do by ourselves. And that is the gospel of II-Isaiah. And that is the gospel, the good news of God. With this God, all things are finally possible.”

God offers the Israelites hope and promise, goodness, forgiveness, and radical hospitality. God offers a banquet spread out before us – a free gift of love and grace – shown to the Israelites in their exiled hopelessness; a future plan of covenant with God; and the same gifts are offered to us in our own journey and time.

Return to the Lord, Isaiah says. ⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.

The promises – the Covenant of God has been everlasting. We can give thanks that God continues to call us to turn around, to repent of our sinfulness, our turning from Him.

We are offered, instead of punishment and judgment, a Savior who still today invites us to “Come! Come to the banquet that he has spread out for us. Come, all who are thirsty, drink from his cup. Come, all who are hungry, eat his bread. Come, with no money. It only costs your heart.”

In this season of Lent, as we continue on this rugged path to the cross, following in Jesus footprints, we think about Jesus’ gift of his life, given for us, and as we come to the Lord’s Supper, let us rejoice and give thanks for this fine gift of food and wine. Let us satisfy our thirst and our hunger for God at this table.

Come! Come to the banquet of grace.

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