

Isaiah 55:1-13

Isaiah is the longest and most important of the prophetic books. It covers a long period of Israel's history, before, during, and after the Babylonian exile, while offering the full range of God's prophetic message: from terrifying words of judgment to comforting words of promise. Isaiah portrays God as the powerful creator, like no other, as well as the gentlest comforter, like an earthly lover or mother. Isaiah is referenced in the New Testament more than any other prophet.

The book of Isaiah is actually three books in one. "First Isaiah" includes the first 39 chapters and talks about life in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, before it fell to Babylon. "Second Isaiah" covers the next fifteen chapters and deals with the exile in Babylon and later Persia. "Third Isaiah" starts at chapter 56 and ends with chapter 66 - the last chapter. It deals with the time when the Jews returned to their homeland. Today we are near the end of the exile.

Isaiah speaks a message of comfort and challenge to hearers of his own time, (eighth to sixth centuries BCE), telling them and us that God's word endures forever along with memorable promises of messianic hope to every generation. Prophetic books like Isaiah are written in poetry and should be read with an appreciation of their figurative and suggestive character rather than as literal blueprints for particular historical eras. Today's pericope is near the end of Second Isaiah which has also been called, the "Book of Comfort." It begins by addressing the exiles who were returning from Babylon.

When Cardinal Bergoglio, a Jesuit priest from South America, was elected Pope, 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, according to Ecclesiastes, just when you get used to the idea that “there is nothing new under the sun,” something unprecedented happens.

The writer of this 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, some fifty years later, 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. So maybe there was something new under the sun after all.

In Isaiah, we find poems celebrating Cyrus, even calling him a “messiah,” a king anointed by God to carry out God’s plans. The author of Second Isaiah firmly

believes that the only possible explanation for such an unprecedented turn of events was that Yahweh was in control of all of human history. The poems in this section depict the imminent return of the exiles as a new Exodus, which ushers in a new creation.

Isaiah invites the exiles living outside of Judah in the sixth century BCE, at the dawn of Persian rule, to uproot themselves, move to a land their generation never knew, and reclaim their ancestral home.

The Babylonian exile of the Jews was portrayed in Scripture with such moving imagination that later readers saw in it much more than history. Poetry eloquently describing a pragmatic return from exile in spiritual terms soon came to be read as describing the spiritual journey of every believer - from our various alienations to our home in God. Isaiah constructs several bold arguments for this journey: to reclaim the legacy of Abraham and Sarah; to reenact the exodus from Egypt so many centuries earlier; to live out Israel's role as God's own creation. In chapter 55 the poet imagines repatriation as a welcome to a bountiful feast of satisfying foods, hosted by none other than God.

The bold exhortation embedded in the thrice-repeated imperative verb "come ... come ... come" is to choose well. Come to the water; come to the banquet; come buy without money. In other words, don't take what has value and waste it on nothing. Don't settle for what doesn't feed; take only what is good. Soon the food imagery recedes, and returning to the land is merged with returning to God. Clear

distinction is made between seeking God's ways and failing to seek them. Because God's ways are so radically different from human ways, because God's thoughts are not human thoughts, they won't be found by any other means than through this Godward journey.

In the final four verses, God's own words are compared to the rain and snow that bring food from the ground. Mountains, hills, and trees – powerful figures of the natural world – are imagined singing and clapping in celebration when the exiles return. Verdancy quickly follows as cypress and myrtle appear. The exiles are beckoned to choose to position themselves as recipients of God's bounty, both physical and spiritual.

Lurking behind this text is the reality that many Jews living in Babylon at the time did not choose to return to Jerusalem. Three weeks ago, we heard God speak through Jeremiah, telling the newly exiled Israelites to make a life in Babylon. God would bring the people back to Israel - but not right now. So, build your homes, get married, have children, build and enjoy a new life in exile because it is going to last for quite a while.

Isaiah informs the exiles that finally, the time to come home has arrived. They are to come back to Jerusalem where God will give the returning exiles a feast. Bread, milk, water, all of this will be given to the people - and there is nothing that they have to do to receive it - an early understanding of grace. A meal can be a sign of coming home and this is what is happening here; God is leading the people home

where they can have a hot meal after a time of trauma. The food is also a covenant. God is establishing a new covenant with David, meaning the Davidic dynasty.

Isaiah anticipates God's coming to restore Israel, and in one of Isaiah's bold moves to open God's work to all, the prophet announces that the everlasting covenant with David is now made with all Israel anticipating the coming of not just one new king, but the identification of all believers as God's royal people: "Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David. See how I used him to display my power among the peoples. I made him a leader among the nations." God isn't talking about a restoration of the royalty, but the covenant is now with the entire people of Israel. The covenant is not with one person, but with the whole people and the feast is a sign of that bond between God and Israel.

Recent archaeological finds provide evidence that by 538 BCE, when Cyrus sent the Jews back to Jerusalem, the Jewish community had been well-integrated into Babylonian society. They had jobs, owned homes, and even lent money to others. Under both 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 centres 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 – the whole infrastructure. It was not an attractive prospect for a generation who had no personal experience of the old city.

While the deported elites yearned for a return to Jerusalem, it is clear that they also came to terms with the Babylonian regime and the Babylonian economy, enough to participate in the opportunities and requirements of the imperial order. In doing so, they inevitably compromised their distinctive Jewish identity as members of a neighbourly covenant. It was an uneasy balancing act for them, to participate fully in the dominant economy, and to practice at the same time an intentional and distinctive faith identity. That same uneasy balance is the very one that many of us seek to maintain in our own political and economic setting.

The message of Isaiah is that he wants his Jewish listeners to heed his call to remember their distinctive identity, and so to retreat from commitment to the empire. The purpose of his summons is that his listeners will be prepared to return to Jerusalem with a clear covenantal identity, because geo-politics is about to permit such a release as the grip of Babylon wanes in the face of Persian power.

The poet calls his listeners to make a clear choice. He offers them an option of the generous self-giving of YHWH, the God of covenant. Food seems to be a major theme that runs throughout the Bible along with the sense of journey. There was the journey to the promised land. Now we witness the time of exile and the

journey back. There is a lot of talk about a feast for the people in the context of getting ready for coming back to Israel. God invites the people then as well as today to come to the feast.

This God has in past times given Israel manna-bread and water in the wilderness, and will now generously give all that is needed for life ... free water, free milk, and free wine, all gifts of God. The homecoming will be enacted because of God's fidelity to the covenant with David.

The opening verses with their appeal to those who do not have money to buy bread and the basic needs of life, would probably have been quite relevant to those who returned to the land of Judah. ; "Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink - even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk - it's all free! Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength? Why pay for food that does you no good? Listen to me, and you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the finest food."

Despite the allowance of Cyrus and the Persian Empire for their return, it was not a prosperous time. Jerusalem had not been rebuilt since its destruction by the Babylonians. Social and economic structures were weak. The returnees vied with those who remained for the most desirable land. The invitation to eat and drink without paying would have been both gracious and exceedingly welcome. Even today, help given without expectation of reward is viewed as more virtuous.

As the exiles enter Jerusalem, they are also called to change their lives. God doesn't say, "change your ways and I will feed you," God gives the meal no matter

what. But if they enter God's presence, they should change their ways. Notice that the word "wicked" is used. Theologian Walter Brueggeman thinks it is not referring to disobedience but to something else related to the exile.

"The wicked," he writes, "are not disobedient people in general. In context, they are those who are so settled in Babylon and so accommodated to imperial ways that they have no intention of making a positive response to Yahweh's invitation to homecoming. That is, they have no *thought* of enacting Jewish passion for Jerusalem. To *return* to Yahweh here means to embrace fully the future that Yahweh is now offering. This *return* is not simply a spiritual resolve, but the embrace of a new hope and a new historical possibility that entails a dramatic reorientation of life in political, public categories. Those who have excessively accommodated the empire are to be pardoned. But pardon requires serious resolve for a reordered life commitment."

So God's action calls for a response. God calls the people to repent, to change their ways and follow God. They were used to the ways of Babylon, but that time is now over and it is time to come home.

The exhortations to listen, to seek the Lord, and to choose between wickedness and the way of the Lord show the connections with Wisdom traditions. The invitation issued by Isaiah is similar to that of Woman Wisdom to her table in Proverbs: "*Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.*" These passages emphasize the

choices a person faces in the course of a life, and they portray the divine summons as working through appeal and persuasion rather than command.

Much of Second Isaiah is an exhortation to this community to return. The poems promise that God will cause even the desert to bloom if they return. This is 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. The people are exhorted to recognize that the tangible wealth that they enjoy in Babylon is nothing compared to the rewards God has in store if they return.

“Seek the Lord while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near,” begins a clear exhortation, 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 refers to God's covenants with Israel. God has sworn to those covenants, especially the covenant with David; “I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David.” 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.

Christians can look at this passage and see how it can relate. The meal in the chapter sounds a lot like communion. We are offered a meal and we do this with the bread and the wine. There is nothing we have to do to accept this meal, but it is a sign of God's grace. God's grace can drive us to a response, to seek to live righteously.

In the 1997 document, "The Use and Means of Grace," the Evangelical Lutheran Church explains that communion is all about gathering for a meal, the confession of sins, and the need for God. Communion also reminds us of the future feast we will have with God. The people of Israel were called by God to come home to a marvellous feast and learn again the ways of God. We are also called home each week to a feast where we also learn the ways of God and seek to be Christ's people in the world, drawing everyone to Jesus.

In Isaiah, God's act of redeeming a small group of exiles will transform the entire world. We might read this as both a cause of great rejoicing as well as humility. God's desire to bless and re-create is mind boggling in its immensity and power. Before such a God, our imaginations are alight with wonder and joy, not only for ourselves, but for all of God's creation.

Amen.