

Olney Presbyterian Church

3rd Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2016

Meditation for Worship Preparation

Lent is a time for prayerful consideration of our faith; what it means in understanding our life. Psalm 63 is a beautiful expression of our need for the relationship which God offers to us. "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." Even in our culture where water is relatively plentiful, this is still an image that we can understand. The images of verse 5 seem to echo the words of Isaiah about God's invitation: "My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast." On our walk through the events that led to Jerusalem, do we consider how the invitation to the feast should resonate throughout every aspect of our life beyond the sanctuary, beyond the season of Lent?

Prelude

Calvary, Newell

Jerry H. Fulham

Welcome & Announcements

As a community within the body of Christ, we need to speak of activities and opportunities. We have shared some news of joy and sorrow. All of these things serve to bind us together. But our true connection is found in our confidence that:

This is the day the Lord has made; **Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

Because we can rejoice in the day the Lord has given us, we come into the sanctuary leaving behind those things which strive to discourage us in order to be nourished as only God can.

Please stand as you are able as we join in this responsive call to worship.

*Call to Worship

Based on Isaiah 55: 1-13

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.

We seek the Lord, repent and return so we may live.

All who are hungry for righteousness, come to the waters.

We seek the Lord, repent and return so we may live.

All who need the help of God, come to the waters.

We seek the Lord, repent and return so we may live.

We come to worship while the Lord is near.

Our first hymn this morning contains a call which echoes the words of God through both Isaiah and the psalmist—the invitation and the need to seek God. Hymn #478 in the CPH

*Opening Hymn

Seek Ye First

#478, CPH

In many places in Scripture we find the words of the Lord calling us to turn from sinful ways in to the ways of God. This is often expressed in the very personal call to return to God. Return because God offers mercy and pardon. Trusting in that pardon, let us call upon God who is near to us.

*Prayer of Confession

Holy God, as we walk through this Lenten season we are called to turn our lives toward you; to turn away from all those things which have harmed us and others; to separate ourselves from actions and attitudes that demean and destroy. We confess that we have grown complacent in our response to you. You set before us a rich feast of blessing, but we are drawn to those things which fail to satisfy. You call us to attend to the needs in the world, but we indulge our own desires. Our ways are not your ways; our thoughts do not ascend to your thoughts. Forgive us when we fall short of your claim upon our lives; quicken our desire for a more fruitful life. Aid us to amend our lives to become who you intend us to be. We ask this in the name of our Savior, your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Assurance of Pardon

As people claimed by God, know that God's love is sure and steadfast, always providing a way out, a way through, a way back. Through the waters of baptism we have died with Christ and are raised with him. In faith, with grateful joy, we are called to walk the way of Christ.

*Hymn of Response

Spirit of the Living God

#244, CPH

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.

Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.

Please be seated.

As God's beloved, let us seek to quench our thirst through the word give to us as our guide. Let us pray.

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious and loving God, we seek you in your word as though we are searching for water in a dry and weary land. By the power of your Holy Spirit may this word be received by us as a rich feast, satisfying the soul. May the mediations of my mouth and those of all our hearts be acceptable to you this day. Amen.

Instead of using a creed or a portion of a confessional statement about our faith this morning, we will affirm what we believe from the passages of scripture listed. **Please stand as you are able for this reading.**

*Affirmation of Faith From 1 Cor. 15:1-6; Mark 26: 1-9; Matt. 16:16; Rev. 22:23; John 20:28

This is the good news which we have received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved, if we hold fast: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared first to the women, then to Peter, and to the Twelve, and then to many faithful witnesses. We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus Christ is the first and the last, the beginning and the end; he is our Lord and our God. Amen.

Please be seated.

God calls us into a new way of being and gives us many second chances in life--chances to live into the love we are called to give to one another. As a commitment to that call, let us join in prayers for others, known and unknown.

Prayers of Intercession & Lord's Prayer

God of generous provision, we are grateful for the many ways you care for us and provide for the needs of your people. In Word, water, bread and wine, you offer us an abundant feast to nourish and sustain us. We know the invitation to come to your feast is always open. Sometimes though we find ourselves in a dry and weary land...we see that drought and famine leave people facing hunger and starvation. God help us to find ways to care for creation and each other so that it is possible for all to have enough food and water for abundant life. Sometimes we find ourselves in a dry and weary land where in many places war has torn those places and people apart, where hospitals and homes and entire cities have been reduced to rubble, where human lives have been destroyed and deformed; where peace lies in ruins and hope is buried in the rubble. Lord, raise up peace among us again. Build up hope from the ground. Restore in us and in the world's leaders the will and determination to make an end of war and a new beginning for justice. Sometimes we find ourselves in a dry and weary land where we are lost, and unable to find our way to a place that is home for us. We are sad and weighed down with regret or grief. We are tired or sick in body, mind or spirit. Loving God, provide water in the desert and manna in the wilderness—enough to sustain us day by day, enough to revive us for the long haul. Other times Lord we find ourselves in the rich feast of

your presence. These times when we celebrate a new beginning in our lives; a new job, a new relationship, a new live, a new day when we have let go of a burden of resentment or found forgiveness in our hearts. We give thanks to you, O God, for these blessings. Sometimes we find ourselves in the rich feast of your presence as we experience healing after injury or illness, when we find hope amidst chaos or despair, when we find joy in the middle of sorrow. O God, we thank you for the gift of wholeness and resurrection promised to us through Jesus Christ. We thank you that you are reconciling all to in heaven and on earth so we pray that we may participate in your work as Jesus taught us to pray, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen

As disciples of Jesus and children of God we are call to give to the things that are of God: bread for the hungry, good news for those who are oppressed, and the ministries of the church that welcome strangers and sons and daughters alike. We now bring before the Lord a portion of that which we have been given.

Offering

Offertory	<i>Jesus Paid It All</i> , arr. Jerry H. Fulham	Jerry H. Fulham
*Doxology	“Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow”	#253, CPH
*Prayer of Dedication		

Let us pray.

God of both wilderness and Promised Land, in days of want and plenty, you are with us. By these gifts we now share, may others know of your providence and care. Send us—not only our offerings, but our very selves—to console and comfort, to lift up and to reach out, to listen and sit beside your children everywhere so that your kingdom comes near. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Our closing hymn today might well be taken as an instruction manual for the way we are to live—a life spent trying to follow the teachings given to us—not because obedience earns us any protection from the events of life, but because we trust that whatever we encounter on this journey we make, we will be accompanied by one who understands. The key to that abundant life promised in scripture is to trust is the one who loves us so. Hymn #447: Trust and Obey.

*Hymn of Sending	Trust and Obey	#447, CPH
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*Charge and Blessing

On this third Sunday of Lent we are urged to shake off the complacency that can overtake us; to seek God as people in a dry and weary land seek water; and then to bear good fruit in our daily lives that contributes to God's kingdom of justice and love.

May the mercy of God ground us, the love of Christ take root in us, and the Holy Spirit grow in us, so we may be ready for the coming of the kingdom.

Postlude

I Am Loved, Gaither

Jerry H. Fulham

Isaiah 55: 1/Luke 13:1-9 God's Ways and Ours

The Hebrew word which begins Isaiah 55:1 which we see translated as “Ho!” is interesting. In some contexts it is translated as alas or woe, in a lament for example. Like our English dictionary various meanings which can be used to understand a word are given in the Hebrew lexicon. The meaning connected to a lament is the first listed for this word. The second meaning given for this word is a dire prophetic warning. “Sit up, pay attention or else!” is the context. The third meaning listed is that it is an encouraging or inciting word. That is quite a range of uses. Isaiah 55 portrays an invitation to the people to come back to God. In that sense it offers encouragement, an inducement: “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.” What an invitation! Surely this is an invitation capable of encouraging the people to return to God; making the third use of that attention getting word “Ho” appropriate for this verse. But if you look back and consider where the people are and why when this text is believed to have been written, then the nuance of lament seems just as likely. The people are in exile away from the Promised Land which God gave to them in covenant promise. They are there because they have turned away from God. God continues to issue the invitation, but can't you hear the echo of God's disappointment in their actions: “Why do you spend 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”. God continues to offer the promise of the covenant. Next in this passage comes an injunction from Isaiah: “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 upon them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” At this point in the passage we hear sounded a note of warning—seek the Lord while he is near. There is an implied message that this opportunity might not continue forever—seek God while he is near. It is not that God will cease to issue the invitation which at first glance might be the case. The question is how many times will the people have to do this turning. In this invitation issued by God we have the promise of abundance freely given which will satisfy the thirst and yearning we feel; we only need to return to God. The predominate verbs in this passage are come, seek, listen and see. God tells the people he is near. They just need to turn toward him for their unrighteous thoughts and wicked ways to be forgiven. This presents a clear picture of God's grace. It is a wonderful invitation to what we would call a “free lunch” these days. The problem is that the world then and now tells us there is no such thing as a free lunch. God says otherwise. In this passage, not only is there a free lunch—bread and water, but even better—a rich feast that is free. God tells us the really good things in life are free, actually truly free. You don't need money for them. Real community is free. The love of God is free—costs you nothing. This is an outside the box of our understanding idea. To make matters more difficult to comprehend, when David and God's covenant with David is brought up in this verse it is expanded. David becomes a witness to the peoples, a leader and a commander for the peoples. Notice “peoples” is plural, not the singular speaking of Israel alone. It means not just those of Israel, but all of the different peoples. David's covenant and witness was for the enemy, for heathens, for idolaters, for Gentiles, for the foreigners who

create problems for us. This is a prophetic proclamation that God is the God of all humanity—Babylonians, Moabites, Philistines, Samaritans, all the peoples. This was most certainly way, way outside their box of understanding for God. This means that in God’s sight there really is no “us and them”. In these verses God has promised forgiveness for the wicked and unrighteous who return to God despite what they may have done previously. This may explain the next part of the passage—“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.” Isaiah in this passage has God speaking “outside the box”—outside the box of human moral imagination. God does not confine divine thought to the box of what human beings can conceive. The verse telling us that God’s thoughts are not like ours seems obvious—Of course, they are different. God is mysterious, God doesn’t think like we do. Otherwise God would not be God. This is something that we readily accept as a generalization. But when we find God sharing those thoughts that are different—higher than ours—in specific concrete ways—well we often have problems with them. When God invites us to also step outside the box in the way we consider others—when we are invited to come for that free lunch that is offered to everyone—the wicked and the unrighteous—those like us and those not—we often have a hard time with those thoughts. That is often the temptation of those who profess a religious life—to see in our situation and in our God only things that pass the test of our own mind. Even though we might confess the unlimited nature of God and the mysteries of the divine ways, we sort of “expect” God to act according to our understanding of the situation; that God’s plans resemble those we have. But Isaiah tells us that is not God’s way. At first glance the gospel passage from Luke seems to be the counterpoint to that invitation to a free feast. There is a section previous to today’s passage in Luke which speaks of judgment. Because this occurs immediately after exhortations to be prepared, associations with judgment come to mind. This particular passage begins with some present in the crowd around Jesus bring up a matter of concern—it seems that Pilate who historically is known for his brutality has evidently massacred some Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem. We do not have the particulars about this incident as Luke is the only account which mentions it. But evidently, some pilgrims who had gone to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the Temple were slaughtered by Pilate. Like some of our headlines, it was the tragedy of the day. When questioned about this even, Jesus response is: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” Jesus then brings up another incident which resulted in the death of eighteen hapless Jerusalemites when the “tower of Siloam” evidently failed structurally and fell on them. The question is pretty much the same: “Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem.” Jesus’ answer to both of his rhetorical questions is “No”. Jesus connects two separate types of events—a state sanctioned terror and a random accident. Both saw people snuffed out with little warning and for no clearly apparent reason. Jesus implies that the individuals did nothing wrong which caused their deaths. He just notes that life is capricious, brutish and short. Jesus does not overtly defend God against changes of mismanaging the universe so that guilt and suffering are punishments. He implies that we must not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Tragedy just happens. But there is a caveat added: “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Jesus points out life’s fragile nature. He is not

interested in the “why” of those events, but in the actions of those who have survived the hazards of the universe and human society. Jesus wants to talk about repentance. The need for repentance is a universal condition, shared by random victims and finger-crossing survivors. Jesus twice says, “unless you repent you will all perish.” Jesus here is speaking to his audience telling them to repent while they have the opportunity, just as Isaiah told his audience to return to the Lord while the Lord is near. The invitation is open. Jesus affirms that in the parable of the fig tree. The man has come to the vineyard looking for fruit from the tree he planted for three years, but has found none. The instruction to the gardener is to cut it down because it is wasting the soil—something more fruitful could be planted there. But the gardener asks the he be allowed to tend to it another year, supplying more nourishment before it is cut down. This is a metaphor for God’s patience and mercy towards humanity. God is endlessly ready to have us repent and turn and return to God’s ways. God works to seek us out, to nurture us and help us to bear good fruit. God has even sent Jesus Christ to suffer in our stead so as to keep us from being cut down. God provides an abundant feast and seeks to supply our thirst and hunger with things that truly satisfy. Why? Because God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and God’s ways are not our ways. That is the message we need to understand in this Lenten season. Our thoughts tend to get bogged down in the realm of the “reality” we understand. We live very easily in the grooves of the past so they become the ruts of the present. We need to remember how differently God thinks; how differently God’s ways of dealing with us are from our ways of dealing with each other. From Luke’s passage we can see the obligation of every person is to live in penitence and trust before God. That penitent trust is not to be linked to life’s sorrows or life’s joys. Often this does not satisfy us as we want to be able to explain away suffering. Or we want God to give those we think evil or wrong what we think they deserve. Or we want works righteousness even when we say we believe in grace. But God calls all—everyone who thirsts to come, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! God has provided the abundant feast of things that truly satisfy our needs. Thanks be to God.