

“FEASTING AND FASTING”

Becky Stephens

3rd Sunday in Lent

Text: Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Hear the text today as read through video.

Isaiah 55:1-9 [Play Video]

55 *“Is anyone thirsty?*

Come and drink—

even if you have no money!

Come, take your choice of wine or milk—

it’s all free!

² *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.

³ *“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.

⁴ *See how I used him to display my power among the peoples.*

I made him a leader among the nations.

⁵ *You also will command nations you do not know,*

and peoples unknown to you will come running to obey,

because I, the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, have made you glorious.”

⁶ *Seek the LORD while you can find him.*

Call on him now while he is near.

⁷ *Let the wicked change their ways*

and banish the very thought of doing wrong.

Let them turn to the LORD that he may have mercy on them.

Yes, turn to our God, for he will forgive generously.

⁸ *“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD.*

“And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.

⁹ *For just as the heavens are higher than the earth,*

so my ways are higher than your ways

and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

We humans hunger for comfort and security, the assurance that everything is going to be OK when life threatens to overwhelm us. That may be one reason churches like ours seem to specialize in potluck dinners. Gathering around tables and sharing our lives as well as food is part of who we are. I’ve been to countless potlucks in my life, and I can’t remember ever going and *not* finding calorie-laden goodness spread like a crazy quilt of love and hope. Traditional comfort foods of our childhood both fill our bellies and hug our hearts. There is always just enough, like manna from heaven—never too little, never too much.

As faithful folk, we know how to fuel the *body* and how to make *love* the central ingredient in almost any dish. When we lack words, we bring food. When we wish to dispense comfort and care, it often comes in the form of casseroles and hot dishes, all seasoned with the spirit of love and garnished with a sprig of hope. Comfort food and tables of plenty are NOT usually associated with the season of Lent.

Tradition compels us to think of Lent as a time of self-denial and intense introspection and contemplation. This season sets itself apart as a time of fasting from the luxurious and indulgent. A boisterous feast at God’s table is the last thing that we would expect to see embodied in the words of our Scripture for this week. Yet here we are, all the same, duty-bound to come to God’s Table, no matter the state of our wallets or the state of our hearts. We have made it through two weeks of Lent. We have found ourselves grounded in offering the first fruits of the harvest and uplifted by the promises suspended like stars in the night sky. Today, we will be asked to leave our “chosen” pathways, repent, and turn back to God who always has “plenty good room” at the Table for us.

Before we hear the words of Isaiah 55 in any kind of meaningful way, we need to consider the context in which these words were written. The people of Israel find themselves at the end of a very long exile in Babylon. Even the recollection of what the Promised Land was and how to inhabit that land had faded from the collective memory. If these exiles had heard of the promises of the everlasting covenant made to David at all, it was only in hushed whispers and half-remembered tales that must have sounded more like a dream than any sort of possible reality.

It appears the people of Israel were *feasting* and *fasting*. They were feasting on the economy of scarcity that empire always places upon its people—the belief that they will never *have* enough, never *be* enough. While they were feasting on the logic of empire, they were also fasting. They fasted from the abundant promises of God and from the assurance that God would one day lead them back home. This fast left them starved of hope and starved of heart. In this vastly malnourished state, the call to come to a table of plenty must have sounded too good to be true. The invitation of Isaiah 55 was also a call to repent (literally to turn around) and accept God’s gracious, irresistible invitation to come, buy, eat, listen, delight—break the chains of their long fast!

As we look out at our world this Lent, we see a similar type of feasting on scarcity, fear and distrust. It seems to be the hallmark of our “well-fed” society. Maybe, we need to repent of our feasting on the things that do not satisfy. When we turn our hearts and lives around and incline our ears to God’s invitation to come to the table, the sound is strange to our ears. “Nothing is free,” we say. Nothing is without cost. We have stuffed ourselves for so long with greed, cynicism, and inadequacy that we have forgotten what real nourishment looks like.

There is nothing to fear from the invitation to the table of plenty. “Let them return to the Lord,” Isaiah proclaims, “that he may have mercy on them.” Solid helpings of repentance and forgiveness are served at the table. The grace of God is far more filling than anything else in which we have mistakenly put our trust. God reminds Isaiah’s listeners that the ways of God are not our ways (thank God for that!) The way of God leads us to a table where all are welcomed and fed and are claimed beloved.

This table might begin to sound familiar to us as Christ's table where Christ invites "all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another." This is the feast we should choose this Lent. And as for fasting, well, Isaiah tell us of a fast that is fruitful. Isaiah 58:6-11 claims:

*"No, this is the kind of fasting I want:
Free those who are wrongly imprisoned;
 lighten the burden of those who work for you.
Let the oppressed go free,
 and remove the chains that bind people.
7 Share your food with the hungry,
 and give shelter to the homeless.
Give clothes to those who need them,
 and do not hide from relatives who need your help.
8 "Then your salvation will come like the dawn,
 and your wounds will quickly heal.
Your godliness will lead you forward,
 and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind.
9 Then when you call, the LORD will answer.
 'Yes, I am here,' he will quickly reply.
"Remove the heavy yoke of oppression.
 Stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumors!
10 Feed the hungry,
 and help those in trouble.
Then your light will shine out from the darkness,
 and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon.
11 The LORD will guide you continually,
 giving you water when you are dry
 and restoring your strength.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
 like an ever-flowing spring.*

We still have a way to go in this Lenten season. The journey is about seeking a way that is not our own way but following the pathway to God's heart. May our feasting *and* fasting bring justice, comfort, and living water to us road-weary travelers. May our heart find contentment and sustenance for the journey of homecoming.