

**March 20, 2022 Third Sunday in Lent**  
**Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church**  
**Isaiah 55:1-9**  
**"Fulfilling Invitational Imperatives"**  
**Douglas T. King**

It is 11 at night. You are flipping through the television channels when your eye is captured by a program in black and white. A man sits at a table with a weary and weakened look in his eyes. Before him are countless containers; hollow crackerboxes; soup cans long ago opened and emptied; deflated bags that once held bread; now dry plastic water bottles rattle. Fruitlessly he reaches for crumbs and drops of water which neither satiate his hunger nor quench his thirst. There is so much mess but no nourishment to be found. In discouragement and disgust the man sweeps his arms across the table, sending the useless detritus flying. His eyes, look up and into the distance and with a pleading, hoarse voice he cries out, "I am so hungry and so thirsty...please..." The man slumps down, his head, wrapped in his arms, lands on the table. After lingering there a moment the camera pans up and back to reveal a second table directly behind the man. It is filled with every delicacy and delight one could imagine. Rod Serling steps into the shot and with that Twilight Zone voice of his announces, "A man so close to the sustenance he needs, but so focused on what is right before him, he cannot see what is so near to his grasp...."

Whenever I hear this text from the fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah and its words of wine and milk and rich foods, my mind immediately wanders to a sumptuous banquet table overflowing with all of my favorite treats. And once I am there it is kind of hard to think about anything else. But whenever we engage with a biblical text it is always wise to pay careful attention to the verbs and this case is no different. The verbs in the early part of this text are telling. "Come." "Buy." "Eat." "Listen." They are a string of what I would call invitational imperatives.

Another important way in which we engage the biblical text is by understanding its context. This portion of Isaiah was shared with the nation of Israel while they were in exile. They were words of comfort to a people that had everything they knew taken from them. These

words were welcoming them home. These invitational imperatives were a roadmap directing the Israelites back to their homeland and the right worship of their God.

So how do these words speak to us in our context? We are not in exile. The Israelites knew they were lost. They knew they were in need. When the prophet calls them with those invitational imperatives, they knew they were thirsty; they knew they were hungry. They are the man in the Twilight episode who knows he is in need; who only needs to be told to turn his head and the feast he knows he needs will be before him.

Because of the comfort of our lives, in one way we are in a more precarious position. We could be sitting at the same table with emptiness before us not realizing we are thirsty, we are hungry. It is easy for us not to listen for invitational imperatives. With our basic needs so well met we can easily lose sight of our need for the divine. We can be under the illusion that the empty boxes before us are all we need and thus stop searching for the God we truly need. We can believe our time and energy can best be spent elsewhere. The line of this text that might speak most to us is “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

When the invitational imperatives are spoken to us will we take the time to listen? Are we so busy attempting to fill ourselves with other less than important things that we have grown groggy, overfed and yet undernourished, and thus unable to hear the divine’s call to us? Writers of Christian spirituality often speak of the God-shaped hole within us. In other words we have been created to be in relationship with the divine and when we are disconnected from God there is inherently something missing within us.

Now, we may seek to fill that hole within us in a variety ways, perhaps by endlessly entertaining ourselves; or allowing ourselves to be completely consumed by work; or whatever else may distract us. These things can be wonderful elements of our lives. But if we mistakenly pursue them in place of our relationship with God we will end up being malnourished.

I will let you in on a little secret. I am an infamous late night eater. During the day I am pretty disciplined. I mostly eat vegetables, fruit and whole grains (kale, carrots, and an apple for breakfast every day). But the dark of night can bring out my glutinous side. I can find myself

rummaging through the refrigerator and the closets in search of something to satisfy me. And as I search, I taste and sample along the way. Maybe a piece of cheese will do the trick. No, perhaps a cookie. No that's not it. What should I be nibbling on next? Do you ever have that experience when no matter what you eat it is just not providing you with that sated feeling you are craving? Your stomach is full, you have eaten all of the calories you need and yet something is missing, a taste, a texture, something...

Well our lives can be like that. We may not be in exile but in the midst of the vast uncertainty of our world, as war rages and the effects of the pandemic linger, we carry this sense of incompleteness, unease, even fear. We attempt to fill ourselves up and comfort ourselves with a whole host of things, some of which are good for us, some perhaps some not so much. And yet there is some craving yet to be fulfilled, some itch that goes unscratched, some unnamed longing unsatisfied. Well, God, through the prophet Isaiah, is calling out to us. I am for what you are looking.

What I can promise you without condition is that God is seeking you out, is inviting you to be nourished in the deepest of ways. What I cannot tell you is exactly how God is seeking to connect with each one of us. Yes, as we are gathered here in worship, I would be remiss to not say that worship is the essential starting point for our relationship with the divine. But like all deep and abiding relationships we are called to connect in a variety of fashions. For some of us, we find that connection through the study of scripture. For others, an active prayer life is a vital way we relate to the divine. Still others find that serving those in need brings them face to face with the Christ. And others find meditation a key method by which they welcome God into themselves. Each of us needs to find our own combination. And in different times in our lives different ways will bring us connection to our God.

But the first step is recognizing we do indeed thirst and hunger for the one who created us. And nothing else in the world will fill that God shaped hole inside of us. To paraphrase Augustine, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you, God. When we recognize this existential reality we can allow ourselves to turn our heads from all that does not actually satisfy

and begin our journey to the deep and abiding relationship we are being offered. The bounteous table of extraordinary nourishment is so close at hand.

Let us listen to those invitational imperatives one more time.

“Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without price. Why do you spend your 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.”

Indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.