

“A Lenten Walk with the Bible Jesus Read, Part III: Abundance”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for February 28th 2016 (Third Sunday in Lent)
by Foster Freed

Isaiah 55: 1-9

As someone not much given to what is sometimes referred to as the “health and wealth” Gospel, my hunch—nevertheless—is that **were** I someone so inclined, I could have a field day with this morning’s text, were I to first boil it down to its “health and wealth” core.

*Ho, 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.
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

You see where I’m coming from here, right? The so-called “health and wealth” Gospel—the Gospel of endless abundance pretty much just for the asking—takes it as given that God’s main goal in life is to meet not only our needs but our wants, whatever those wants might be. Say the right prayer, obey the correct commandments, above all—have enough faith—and it’s “kinda” like placing a couple of twoonies in one of those candy dispensing machines on the ferries. Put your money in...make your selection...and presto: out comes the candy...assuming the machine is working properly, that is! It’s as easy as A B C! And if it doesn’t work: well, hey, that’s likely your fault because you don’t have quite enough faith!

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The problem, of course, is that the fallen world in which we live inevitably finds a way to challenge that sort of naiveté. Go no further...go no further than the Bible’s 3rd chapter, in which the first human couple find themselves coming face to face with the implications of the choice they made when they chose to strike out on their own minus God. Ponder, especially God’s subsequent response to Adam:

*...cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken.*

While there is a good case to be made that the Bible lifts some of that curse with the coming of Noah, and lifts even more of that curse with the coming of Jesus, we all know that here, in the world in which we actually live, there are no well-oiled dispensing machines that can meet our every desire and respond affirmatively to our every whim. Like it or not, we're not in Eden any more: and try though we might, "to get ourselves back to the garden", so far we've yet to manage that journey! For all of our remarkable ingenuity and technological sophistication, most people in our world still need to engage in work that is at times challenging, at times tedious, at times deeply frustrating, in order to be able to put daily bread—let alone a bottle of *vino*—on the table! Then again!

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Knowledge of just how hard life can sometimes be...a deep and sure understanding of just how heartbreaking this world can prove to be—would have been a secret neither to the Isaiah who recorded those extravagant promises, nor to the people to whom he spoke. In most scholarly circles, Isaiah is now regarded as a compendium of prophecies spanning a couple of centuries: a book that incorporates the spoken prophecies and possibly in one instance the written prophecies of at least three different prophets. The final section of the book—a section that begins with the Isaiah 55 passage we heard this morning—that final section of the book is thought to come from a time roughly 450 years before Christ: a time well after the Jews, who had been in exile in Babylon, were permitted by King Cyrus of Persia to return home to Jerusalem. The promise of their return is the subject of the preceding 15 chapters, known as 2nd Isaiah: chapters that include some of the most hope-filled passages in all of the Bible. But 3rd Isaiah comes from a time a few decades later when—having returned home—they can no longer pretend that the home to which they have returned is anything other than a discouraging fixer-upper. It was a mess...and given the devastation the Jewish people had experienced at the hands of their Babylonian conquerors, coupled with the fact that after 70 years of exile many of the most accomplished Jewish people chose to stay in Babylon rather than return home, and given the fact that neighbouring nations such as the Edomites did not wish them well, the challenge the Jewish returnees now faced and the discouragement they experienced seemed at times to be overwhelming. We know how bad it can be when an individual falls into deep depression; the Jewish people during this period in their history appear to have fallen into a deep corporate depression. And part...part of the vocation of their prophets...prophets such as 3rd Isaiah...was to stir them up...to encourage them in the face of the tremendous challenges they now confronted.

But you know: as a natural born cynic—a natural born cynic who was eventually cured of the worst extremes of my cynicism through the love of God made known in Jesus Christ—I can nevertheless hear within my own psyche the way in which an uncured cynic might respond to Isaiah. To Isaiah's "*ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come,*

buy and eat!, our untamed cynic might well reply: **Who are you kidding, prophet boy? Water for the thirsty; I don't see any! Bread for the hungry; give me a break! Wine for the asking; yeah, right, sure, whatever!** You see: vending machine theology doesn't fare all that much better in the rough and tumble world Isaiah inhabited nearly 2500 years ago (long before the invention of vending machines!) than such theology fares in our world. Let's not kid ourselves on that score.

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The problem, of course...the problem quite simply...is that you have to pick and choose rather freely from this morning's text, in order to turn it into vending machine theology. There is so much more here than a mere promise that if you push the right button, God will be bound to deliver the item of your choice: much more at stake here starting, of course, with those words I used as our invitation to confession this morning:

*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 on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

You see: whatever it is that Isaiah is getting up to with this message, what he is most definitely not getting up to is the issuing of a blanket invitation to turn God into a heavenly candy dispenser. There are weighty matters at stake here: make no mistake on that score. But there's more.

When Isaiah—more to the point the God who speaks through Isaiah—makes the offer to lavish bread and wine and water upon all who hunger and thirst, that offer comes with a loaded question. In many ways it is the question with which we are meant especially to wrestle during this season we call Lent!

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?*

Why? Why spend your money for that which is **not** bread? Why? Why labour for that which does **not** satisfy? And you know: once those questions are added to the mix, all of the promises made here by the God of Isaiah, take on a whole different complexion. Suddenly, it's no longer a matter of us turning to God and asking God for things! Suddenly it's a matter of us looking in the mirror and asking one of the biggest questions life throws in our direction. "What are the things...what are the things...for which we truly ought to be asking? Which are the things that will matter in the end? Which are the things to which it is not worthwhile to give even a first thought, let alone a second? And which are things

that do matter, the things for which we simply should not take no for an answer.” You see: God turns to us here, as God turned to ancient Israel, and asks us not merely to name our desires, but to **purify** our desires as we name them. And that, of course...

...that, of course, is why so many Christians choose, as part of their Lenten practice, to give something up for Lent. If somebody tells you that we are encouraged to give something up for Lent because God takes pleasure in our suffering, please tell them to think again! No! The reason it might make good sense for us to set aside six weeks, and to give up one or two of the things we most enjoy during those six weeks, is to discover whether those things have come to play an oversized role in our lives. In the process, the hope is that when we settle upon the things that really do matter in our lives, that we'll discover that such things are every bit as abundant as Isaiah claims them to be. Or as a certain prophet out of Nazareth put it some five centuries after the time of Third Isaiah: *ask and it **will** be given to you; seek and you **will** find; knock and the door **will** be opened to you.* Of the things of God...of the things that will matter in the end...of the things that will abide in the end...of such things there is great abundance...great abundance indeed!

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At the end of the day...at the end of the day...the question of abundance is such a crucial spiritual question for us, and the practice of generosity is such a crucial litmus test for us as we address times of abundance in our lives, no less than times of scarcity. As First John reminds us: *perfect love casts out fear*, a verse that makes it as plain as the noses on our faces, that fear is the great enemy of a life of love, including fear driven by the experience of scarcity, the experience of not having enough! Nor need I remind a congregation—many of whom can testify about the aftermath of the Great Depression—nor does this congregation need this “baby-boomer” to remind it that scarcity, not having enough, is part and parcel of life within this broken and battered world. Nor need I remind such a gathering that there is virtue (including virtues much praised in the pages of scripture) in our learning to live frugally, cautiously, responsibly: providing thoughtfully and cautiously for ourselves and our loved ones. There is much to be said for such things. And yet! And yet!

It is a fine line, but a most definite line, that divides such praise-worthy responsibility...from a fear-driven life that clings, that grasps, that dreads every knock at the door and says a determined no to each and every appeal for help. And yes, it is the practice of generosity—even in the tiniest and most tentative of ways—it is the practice of generosity that can often illuminate the abundance that really does surround and sustain us: an abundance rooted in God's own abundance, in the abundance of God's own love. Letting go...permitting ourselves to get beyond our fears...relinquishing even a small amount of what we think of as ours, so that someone else might taste of it. From such small

steps comes the beginning of sanity...comes the first steps toward reclaiming the abundant promise of God's inexhaustible love: this God of ours who makes no idle promises. Not now! Not ever!

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and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.