

You Give Them Something

Isaiah 55:1-5

Most of us resent invitations to meals with strings attached. Thanks, but no thanks! Invitations to meals or banquets occur several times in the Bible, and always come with a hitch. The good news is that all are invited; the bad news is that you have to bring a dish or do something. Adam and Eve got the whole garden for their pleasure, except for one fruit tree they could not resist, but they also were named caretakers of the garden. Jesus broke bread and poured wine, inviting all to a heavenly banquet, but followers were instructed to feed his sheep.

Today's text is no exception. All are invited to the water, but God reminds followers to eat the good things that matter. Isaiah is speaking to Judean exiles in Babylon, the intelligentsia and wealthy who were deemed important enough to deport from Judah to the empire of Babylon. It is now several generations later, and Isaiah is reminding them where they came from. The God who they thought was apparently absent all this time is now inviting them back to rebuild that project of abundant life. However, they had reason to wonder if their god *YHWH* was even still around. After all, had not God's temple home been destroyed? Had *YHWH*'s chosen people not been raped, destroyed, humiliated, and exiled? *YHWH* had lost. The flashy gods of Babylon were obviously stronger and worth homage. Why not live a little and consume as everyone else did? Eat those fast foods, buy Golden Calf Lotto tickets, get sucked into the television set, and watch another ballgame. Ignore your neighbors. They probably just want something. Take care of number one. **David Maxwell**

Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah are grouped together as the Book of Consolation and had a significant place in the life of the Israelite community because it developed during the exilic period, speaking words of hope and consolation to people cut off from their

homes and caught in political situations. This consolation defied the oppressive situations of their lives. Isaiah places the experience of the exiled within the plan of God and as sign of the continued covenantal relationship. The Book of Consolation opens with the prophetic directive, "Comfort, O comfort my people" (40:1). Chapter 55 begins with a vibrant invitation: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!" (v. 1a).

The language of these verses has been compared to that of Middle Eastern market vendors. Water, bread, wine, and milk are available for a banquet. This lavish spread would have special appeal to those who were in exile: God had not abandoned them, despite their oppressive political situation.

Reflections on the cost of these basic human needs are woven through these verses: come and feast "without money and without price" (v. 1b). The plentiful feast is attractive to those in exile, recognizing their economic needs as part of their human needs. "Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food" (v. 2b).

The prophetic writer invites the hearers to reflect on what is valuable: "Why would you spend your money for that which is not bread?" (v. 2a) and again "[why spend] your labor for that which does not satisfy?" In this text and in our time, labor and money have great value, but bread is not all that satisfies. By asking, "What will truly satisfy you?" the author poses a difficult question for a marginalized people to answer. Their answer might come in pragmatic terms of food and money, but the truest satisfaction comes from something more. The prophetic voice in Isaiah comforts, even as it calls for deeper reflection on human valuation beyond such things as social class, wealth, and education.

Verses 3-5 present a new cost analysis, one based on a mutual relationship with God. They call the exiled community to "come to me; listen, so that you may live." This

exiled community then was not damned but blessed, because their status as a chosen people was affirmed. The covenant to which they were invited is one of mutuality, as was that of God's with David. "I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David" (v. 3b). David was their example: a singular figure, humanly flawed but still loved by and in relationship with God. "See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples" (v. 4).

With David as a basis of comparison, the prophetic vision encompasses the exiled community becoming a beacon to call unknown nations to the feast. God honored the Israelite community even in the midst of their troubles. These people will become witnesses to the power of God. "See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you" (v. 5). This means God's covenant is valuable for all people. The generosity of God to an exiled people signals true power, a beacon for other nations. This "constitute[s] the community's fulfillment of its destiny to be YHWH's witness to the nations."

This reading from Isaiah considers the past, not in terms of the failure that led to exile, but in terms of the figure of David. The covenant of God with the chosen people is highlighted in their present moment of exile: rejoicing becomes emblematic of God's fulfilling and fruitful power through history. "Listen, so that you may live." The abundance of life beyond water and bread is given to this covenanted people, even when they are exiled and oppressed by political powers; indeed, God makes a way out of no way. Believing and trusting God's power and love are integral to a genuine faith for individuals and communities.

God's power, love, and generosity, then, underline the hope for the future where the exiled community stood as witness to these things. The cost for the community was not

money but a loving commitment to a covenant with God. This covenant is the true feast, the full satisfaction to which the Israelite community is invited. **Stephanie Y. Mitchem**

Isaiah say that God is calling them and us to a banquet. However, the banquet God invites us to is an uncomfortable one in one sense. Those without money (who sometimes smell, talk, and behave differently from us) and those with money are both invited. There is no A list or B list—just an invitation to show up and eat with others. While most of us prefer to eat and worship with those whose income and status are similar to our own, this is hardly God's vision of life.

These people had heard that Babylon's ruler was about to let them go back and rebuild their cities. Who was this YHWH, who had seemingly abandoned them for generations, to show up now and say these words!? "What do you mean, come to you? *You* come to us! Where have *you* been, YHWH?"

The final verses of the text remind the captives that the project begun so long ago continues. This insignificant, humiliated people will not just survive; they will be a light to others. Surrounded by more powerful and richer countries, YHWH's people will be looked to by many other nations for the kind of society they create in covenant with God. This covenant will be based on protecting the weakest members of society, controlling greed and usury among the more powerful, and breaking down the walls that divide rich and poor. Those with money and those without money will sit together and worship the same God who created them. It is the way they live and treat one another—not how much they owned—that makes them a light to others. That is God's definition of life in abundance. **David Maxwell**

In our own congregation, there was a time, even in recent history, when we were a strong healthy community of faith. We feel like we are currently in exile, but God has not abandoned us. God has a vision for a strong presence in this community where we will give this community something! This is not just about growing and feeling good

about ourselves as a congregation – but when we are restored – we give to others. We have this wonderful facility to be a blessing to others. We have faith, trust and knowledge to be a blessing to others. As we look to God’s future – God’s vision is that our ministry be a blessing to others. You give them something. Don’t tell God you don’t have the resources – God has already provided – you give them something! Don’t use the excuse that we are an older congregation – it is still true that where two or three are gathered in His name, Jesus has promised to be in our midst. You give them something! Don’t say we are old – do we still have life and breath? Then we need to give them something. If we still believe as the psalmist said in Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21:

⁸ The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹ The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

¹⁴ The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.

¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

¹⁶ You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

¹⁷ The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

¹⁸ The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

¹⁹ He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.

²⁰ The LORD watches over all who love him...

²¹ My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

Our prayer is that we trust God; catch God's vision and do what God has enabled us to do. You give them something!

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