

“Free Food”

Sunday, March 7, 2010—Third Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

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Listen, everyone! Are you hungry and thirsty this morning? Are you thinking about coffee hour already? A fabulous meal is waiting for you. What, you say there's no money in your budget for fancy meals? Not to worry. This meal is absolutely free. Yep, milk, wine, prime rib with béarnaise sauce, caramel cheesecake, it's all there for you to eat and enjoy. All you have to do is show up. You're counting calories, you say? No problem. I know it's hard to believe, but this rich meal not only tastes wonderful, it's also good for you, I promise. Come on and eat!

What, you say you have something more important to do? Help me understand that, because I don't get it! I'm offering you free food that I promise will make you full, satisfied, and happy, and you say you're too busy? Oh, you've got something more important to do? Well, let me ask you this. When you get done doing it, will you be satisfied? Let me tell you something. I don't think so.

These are the words the prophet Isaiah speaks this morning. As we reach the half way point in our Lenten journey, he urges us to ask ourselves: What are you really hungry for? A few decades before our text was written, in the latter part of the sixth century BCE, the Babylonians had conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah and marched most of its leading citizens off to Babylon where they had lived as captives ever since.

The people were traumatized by the experience of exile. They hungered for their homeland, with its familiar places and traditions. They thirsted for the loved ones from whom they'd been separated. They were exhausted, physically spent and emotionally depleted. They suffered from a deep sense of isolation and shame, convinced that God had abandoned them. God's covenant seemed a distant memory. Isaiah offers them hope and encouragement. The people will get to go home. A new life will begin.

“Come home,” the prophet says. “Leave your captivity behind. The food in Babylon doesn't nourish you, not in the way I'm talking about. God is still your God and God wants to renew God's covenant of everlasting love with you. Come and sit down at God's table. God invites you to share a rich, filling meal that will satisfy your soul. Come close to God, and you will become truly whole. Why do you give your time and attention to things that will never satisfy you? Why spend your money on things that don't matter when what you need most is absolutely free?”

Isaiah speaks to all those who hunger and thirst. He asks us to think about what it is that is missing from our lives, what it is that we truly crave. He wants us to take a hard look at the ways we cope with our cravings.

What is it we crave? Love and affection? A sense of being needed, valued and respected? Do we crave a friend who knows our faults, and loves us nevertheless? Do we crave

someone who will appreciate the true us behind the face we show the world? Is our deepest desire for power and control, for financial security? Or do we yearn for a celebrity face and an Olympic athlete's body? What are you hungry for?

How do you feed your hunger? Too much eating, too much drinking, too much working, too much TV and internet, too much shopping, too much busyness? What is your drug of choice? What food takes your mind off that emptiness and makes you feel OK for a while, but eventually the cravings, the neediness, the emptiness returns?

The prophet urges us to recognize that our deepest hunger is for relationship with God. At the heart of all our other cravings is the hole in our hearts that only God can fill. We can turn to all sorts of other fillers to try to stop the nagging sense of emptiness. The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill W, used to say that before AA, we were trying to find God in a bottle. The bad news: Fillers, no matter what they look like, don't make us feel less empty, certainly not for long. The good news: Through Jesus Christ, God has promised to fill us.

Centuries after the prophet Isaiah, Jesus came and said: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (John 6:35). He came to fulfill the promise of Scripture: For God satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.(Psalm 107:9).

I was thinking the other day about the Christian tradition that involves "giving something up" for Lent. I did have someone tell me this year that they had given up committee meetings for Lent, but that was an exception. For most folks, the emphasis seems to be on forgoing some food or another, usually something like chocolate or pizza or maybe even diet coke. And if you ask people why they are giving these things up, you might hear something about how Jesus suffered for us and so we should suffer too, as though a comparison can really be made between limiting your consumption of Reese's peanut butter cups and dying a slow death of suffocation on a cross.

I don't think the point of Lent is to deny ourselves the things that give us pleasure out of some notion that this makes us more like Jesus. I have an idea that if Reese's peanut butter cups were available two thousand years ago, Jesus would have enjoyed them. He certainly drank wine and enjoyed parties; I don't know how he felt about committee meetings. The point of Lent is to find ways to get in touch with our deep need for God. Then we can also become aware of the fillers, the things we use to distract ourselves from our true neediness. This, hopefully, encourages us to turn towards God. Now if giving up chocolate helps you do that, go to it. But I suspect the "giving things up" can become a kind of filler in itself, a way of convincing ourselves that we've done our religious duty without ever having to ask the hard questions: to what am I captive in my life? What holds me back from accepting God's free gift of forgiveness and new life in Christ?

Isaiah calls us: Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. The prophet's words have a sense of urgency about them. Our tendency is to think that

when it comes to God, we have all the time in the world to turn away from the fillers that don't satisfy, but the prophet suggests otherwise. And so does Jesus, in the parable he told in this morning's Gospel reading about the fig tree. Six years have passed since the tree was planted, and so far, it has produced no fruit. It just sits there in the orchard, consuming nutrients from the soil, taking up space. Let's cut it down, the landowner says, it's hopeless.

But the gardener has other ideas. "No," he says, "Let's not do that. First, I'm going to do everything I can to help it grow. I'll water it, I'll dig around it and loosen up the hard soil around it. I'll prune it, I'll talk to it, I'll play music for it, I'll feed it my good rich food. Give me another year, I really think I can help it bloom. I don't think it's hopeless. Let's give it another year."

So it is with us. Jesus tends us like the gardener sweating over that fig tree, trying to loosen up all the hard, packed down soil around our hearts. He's trying to get us to let go of all the years we've spent avoiding change, to stop pretending there's nothing we need, that we have it all under control, that divine love and forgiveness might be necessary or desirable for other, weaker souls, just not for us.

In Scripture, the desert or wilderness is often a metaphor for separation from God. When we wander in the desert, a place where everything is dry and dead and nothing blooms, we start to see mirages. We see just ahead of us, the illusion of a full and satisfying life that we can give ourselves. If we just do this, buy that, lose weight, or accomplish the next thing, all will be well with us. Mirages shimmer; they are beautiful and persuasive, but they are lies. A full, eternal life is the gift of God in Jesus Christ. He calls us to leave behind the barrenness of a life lived in the desert, separated from him. He calls us to turn towards him, so we can truly bloom in his light.

If you're thirsty, he says, come to me. And if you're hungry, come to me. Eat what is good, and delight in rich food. I will meet your deepest need. Or as the Psalmist puts it, Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37.4).

Lent is a special season of invitation. God invites us to deepen our relationship with God in Christ. He calls us to leave behind the illusion that we can fix ourselves and mend our lives without his help. He wants us to give up distracting ourselves with junk food. God invites us to God's table to feed the realemptiness that plagues us, to transform us from the inside out, heal us and make us whole. Scripture is very clear that the only thing that will exclude us from this table, and the relationship it signifies, is our own desire to be somewhere else.

Today we will do something we have not done for a while. We Presbyterians call it an "invitation to discipleship". Maybe you have never told Jesus that you want to turn your whole life over to him, not just a few minutes here and there. Maybe you haven't told him for a long time that he is your Lord and Savior and would like to do so now. For those who would like to do so, I will say a prayer of commitment. It is a way of telling Jesus that you want to be in a trusting relationship with him and you want him to be the

Lord of your life. I am going to say it slowly, so that you can, if you want, repeat the words in the silence of your heart. If this is not where your heart is today, that is perfectly OK. You can use the time for silent meditation and reflection. After we pray, we will sing "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian."

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ,

I want you to be the Lord of my life.

I trust that you died for me so I could live close to you.

I want to turn towards God and away from everything that keeps me separated from God.

I need your forgiveness. I trust that in you, I am forgiven.

I ask you to come into my life as Lord and Savior. Please use me to do your work in the world. Help me to follow you daily.

Amen.