

August 2, 2020 - Pentecost 9th Sunday Proper 13A

“The Healing of Abundance; The Abundance of Healing” - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-15; Matthew 14:13-21

Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, calls the Hebrew people to the abundant provision of the Lord. The presence of God is like a vast marketplace full of the best foods and drink, spilling over with celebration and joy.

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. (55:1)

It is a spectacular vision. The Lord says, even commands, the Hebrew people,

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. (55:2b)

Take that in. God desires that we celebrate, partake in what is good, and delight ourselves in those good things.

This is the message Isaiah the Prophet brings to the Hebrew people. This soaring vision of the power and abundance of God is the essence of what God wishes for all of us.

Sometimes, I describe the prophets of the Old Testament as performance artists in the name of God. They do weird things, symbolic acts designed to reframe, reset, and create ‘good trouble’, as John Lewis, the recently deceased congressman and civil rights activist, called it. And this is what Isaiah is doing here - verbal and visionary performance art. If you have been to some performance art pieces, perhaps you thought, as I have, “*This is insane. What does this mean and why would you do this now?*” To the Hebrew people, Isaiah must have sounded insane.

The reason I say that is because Isaiah 40-55 is written during the time of the Babylonian Exile, when the Babylonians came into Jerusalem and destroyed everything, then dislocated the Hebrew people to Babylon. Dislocation was a common practice of empires in the ancient world - forcing conquered peoples to live in other people’s lands and moving people to the cities of the empires. Dislocated, conquered peoples are easy to control, and that is what the Babylonians were trying to do with the Hebrew people - control a difficult, stubborn, strong population. The Babylonians did this several times beginning in 597BC, then in 587, and again in 581.

And so it is in the midst of the lowest point in the history of the Jewish people thus far that Isaiah stands in the crowd and proclaims the abundance of God. Along with the abundance of the Lord that is meant to be enjoyed, that sharing together of this great

banquet is meant to also be a light to the world that will draw all peoples to God, to the light of the world. An abundant, healing re-gathering, re-memembering, return to the Promised Land.

How, then, are we supposed to hear this? The lectionary has us preaching abundance and healing this morning. Why? How?

As of Friday, in America, we are rapidly approaching 160,000 deaths and 4,500,000 cases of COVID-19. Worldwide, 20,000,000 infections and 700,000 deaths are coming up this week. On Friday, we crossed into what is being called the *'housing cliff'*. The pandemic unemployment payments ended, and the foreclosure and eviction exemptions also ended, also on Friday. 32 million people have not paid rent for 3 months, because they couldn't. On the other side, a significant number of landlords were unable to pay their mortgages as a result of not receiving rent. And now both are coming due - evictions and foreclosures will skyrocket in the next months. 5 months into lockdowns, physical distancing, masks, no singing in church...The numbers are staggering and horrifying. Congress, in the meantime, took a *'much needed weekend break'* with no solution in sight. We, as a nation, and a world, share a bit of that dark, deep moment of the Hebrews in Isaiah 55.

These are the Scripture readings that come up for today. In one of our very darkest hours as a country, with no end in sight to that darkness, we hear of a vision of God's abundance and a miraculous manifestation of that abundance with Jesus' feeding of the 5000, plus many women and children, so let's say 10,000 people.

Just as with Isaiah, the context into which God's word is being spoken matters greatly, so also does the context of the miracles of Jesus.

In order to understand this miracle of bread, we need to understand when this miracle took place. Just before this miracle, John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin whom he has known his entire life, since even before he was born, was beheaded by Herod. Why was he beheaded? Because Herod's wife, Herodius, convinced her daughter to request it upon Herod's request that the daughter dance for him.

she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.'
(14:6-7)

It is a kind of quid pro quo. And so, Herodius' daughter dances and John the Baptist's head is brought out on a platter. Everyone is entertained, and their basest desires have been satisfied. Herodius gets control of her husband and revenge against John the Baptist

for dishonoring her. The daughter has the approval of her mother and the appreciative gaze of her step-father. And Herod gets to see a beautiful young woman dance.

This is why, at the beginning of our story today, Jesus wants to be alone. The text doesn't tell us what Jesus' feelings were, but I don't think it is a stretch to say that Jesus is deep in grief for his cousin. Jesus wants to find solitude to give some space to his loss, his sadness, his deeply human and divine grief.

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. (14:13)

But the people won't let Jesus grieve. They want to hear from him. They want to find out what comfort and promise he will give them. The people are hungry. One of the tactics of empires and wealthy countries is to control the food supply and make sure the people who need it either don't get it or get just enough to survive, but not enough to thrive. Before the pandemic, we had more than enough food to feed the world several times over. Now, millions are threatened with food shortages and starvation. In our country, food is a function of economics, and in many places now the lines for food shelves are miles long, even still. Food is physical. It feeds the body. Food is spiritual. It nourishes the soul. Food is political. It defines the boundaries of a gathered people by determining who is worthy of being fed.

In ancient Rome, sometimes the kings of cities would announce the arrival of a Caesar by throwing bread to the crowd, implying that it is the great ruler of Rome, who was also called 'the Son of God', who provides for the people. The one who controls the supply of the most basic of foods is the one who controls your thriving and your living.

But what happens when Jesus sees the crowd? Jesus does not, like a ruler of Rome, expect adoration and adulation. Instead,

he had compassion for them and cured their sick (14:14).

Instead of insisting on nurturing his own grief, Jesus reaches out to the people for the sake of their healing. *Compassion*, in Latin, means *to suffer with*. In Greek, the literal translation is, *his guts went out to them*, since feelings of affection and care originate in the intestines in Greek medicine. Jesus' suffering is shared with the suffering of others.

This is the context of this miracle. The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 is not some glorious celebration at the expense of the suffering of others and one's self. It is not an act that is ignoring the pain and fear and distress of the world. The miracle of bread

arises out of the wounded soul of Jesus and the world. The source of Jesus' compassion is *suffering*.

The disciples come up to Jesus and tell him to disperse the crowd so they can find food in the nearest town because they are hungry and complaining. Or maybe the disciples are complaining because there are so many people. If you are hearing echoes of the Hebrew people in the desert with Moses, complaining about the heat, about how there is no meat, about how good the onions tasted back in Egypt, you should.

No town in Israel in Jesus' time would have been able to handle an influx of 10,000 people descending upon it looking for food. The people have come from all over, from many towns, and now they are a swirling, loud, flowing part of Jesus' continuing entourage across the countryside.

Jesus hears the complaints of the disciples and says, commanding them,

"Why would you send all those people out into the wilderness right now? You feed them."

Perhaps another way of saying this would be, *"Why would you expand the suffering of others? You have compassion for them. Remember when I said, Love one another?"*

The disciples empty their baskets and pockets and gather what they have, which is 5 loaves and 2 fish. Jesus says, *"Let me take that."* And then, out of Jesus' grief, out of Jesus' compassion, out of Jesus' desire to heal everyone, all the gathered people are fed, 5000 plus women and children, with 12 baskets of leftovers no less.

Empires and their leaders serve the heads of prophets on platters for entertainment and petty bargains. They ask that we enrich their ideologies and bank accounts with ridiculous divisions and political theater. They ask that we ignore the suffering of each other in order to glorify their own power and make sure we don't even notice that we are rapidly falling deeper into the darkness.

How does Isaiah put it?

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? (55:2a)

Why, indeed? Don't give the tyranny of division and fear the power it seeks.

Jesus, out of his grief and suffering, serves bread to the many thousands and cures the sick with no regard for their status, their money, their ethnicity, their beliefs, in an act of

miraculous and profound compassion. Jesus asks that we seek the bread that heals, the bread that makes us thrive, the bread that calls us more and more to hold one another up rather than tear them down, that calls us to love in such a way that God is glorified, not our political party, our base desires, or our petty conflicts.

Healing and thriving always arise out of a deep trust in the abundance of God, not out of the management of resources required by the apparent scarcity of what is available to all. Imagine if we approached the *'housing cliff'*, the millions of people who are losing their benefits of unemployment with no jobs to go back to because the small business they worked for is now closed forever, the incredible cost this virus has had on communities of color, imagine if we had begun with a trust in the abundance of God rather than the human management of scarce resources. There is no better time than now to live out of God's abundance rather than human scarcity.

When we hear Isaiah's call to the people of Israel in the depths of isolation and dislocation, when we look out over the many thousands gathered in the desert to experience the healing miracle of the abundant presence of Christ, when we see the lines for food shelves, inner cities hollowed out by failed businesses and riots, death and suffering on a scale in months that years of warfare used to create, how will we receive what we hear and what we see? Will we become prophets of abundance and disciples of healing in a world that has committed itself to scarcity? As 1 John says, *God is love*. And if God is love, then we are meant to be love for one another, in the same way Jesus is for the crowds. God has made us in God's image, and if God's image is love, that is what we are and also what we are becoming. *As Jesus was, so you shall become*, the ancient teachers would say.

Thinking like prophets and seeking experiences like the crowd is how we begin to live out of the abundant healing of the Lord for all peoples. Let us enter into this strange, new world we now occupy as prophets of healing and disciples of abundance. Let us become the people God and Christ wish us to be.

In Jesus' name, Amen.