

First Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 55:1, 10-13 “Waters of Peace”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 12/6/2020

A few days back, the Sunday after Thanksgiving,
my wife Sonja did something courageous:
She put up the Christmas decorations.
Now I don't mean the tree and everything –
that didn't happen until this weekend.

Why is it courageous to decorate for the Advent season
in anticipation of Christmas?
Because it calls forth the hope for something
we don't have much confidence in.

Decorations are for the celebratory times of the season
– for friends and family gathering at various times,
for going out to their homes and having them over to ours.
That's why we decorate.

But right now, we know that those gatherings are, unless substantial precautions
are taken, just not a great idea.

So why decorate at all? Why hope for something we know isn't going to happen?
It takes courage to step out into those waters.

The people of God knew this feeling more deeply and profoundly
than we can imagine. They had once been the recipients
of promises made and kept – they had entered into the land
God gave them, and they had lived there for generations.
King Saul was anointed...and then unanointed,
but then David had ruled and his line continued for many years,
and God promised that his kingship would be an everlasting one.

But then ... but then disaster took over.

 Their leaders failed to honor God, the Torah ceased to be read or lived,
 they became a nation like any other nation,
 and the Lord allowed them to be taken away by the Persians
 to Babylon.

Judgment had come.

Oh, the promises were still there, but who could stir up the courage
 to believe in them, to sing the songs, while living in a foreign land?
 Who could believe that shalom—the presence of both peace
 and justice between God, the people, and the land—
 would be restored?

The answer is a prophet of God.

 It takes someone with not only courage, but a person with heart, creativity,
 and the empowerment of God's Spirit to speak to a people like that.

What we read in today's passage is

 Isaiah's proclamation to Israel on behalf of their God
 in the midst of precisely the circumstances I have just described.

Isaiah announces to a people who are dis-located, alone, in need,
 that their God offers the gracious waters of shalom.

 They must repent of satiating their thirst from tainted sources,
 but they do so to gain a blessing from God of the highest order.

“Come!” the Lord cries out through Isaiah. “Come, all you who are thirsty,
 come to the waters.”

 Just as the Lord provided water for Israel in the desert
 before they had entered the promised land,
 so Israel is offered water in exile.

Not only does Isaiah announce water for the thirsty,
 but also that those who have no money can come,
 buy and eat...without cost!

This like a shopping spree.

I remember as a kid I would literally lay awake at night thinking
about a 1 minute shopping spree at Toys-R-Us ... where would I go?
What could I get? Do I go to the GI Joe guys first or Nintendo Games?

Now it's more, "Come to Roths, load up your carts with all your favorites.

Wine? Yes, the wine, too!" Fill the cart up
and when you go through the check-out stand, guess what?
There's no bill. The checker just smiles and says,
"Have a blessed day."

Imagine! Being able to delight in the richest of fare without money,
and without cost!

This is a picture of grace. Undeserved blessing beyond our imagination.

But hidden within these verses is also a rebuke:

"Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?"

What's happening here is pretty subtle.

Who is spending money on what is not bread and working for what doesn't bring
satisfaction? Israel.

Where are they spending and working? In Babylon.

We have to put ourselves in their world for a moment to catch this.

If you're a foreigner, looked down upon, discriminated against,
and obstructed because of your race and your religion,
what's the best way to get ahead? Is it by being a good Jew?

Is it by standing out with your faithfulness to Yahweh
and remaining loyal to your kin?

No. You get ahead in that circumstance by selling out. By compromising.

By going with the flow. By forgetting your roots
and looking for a quick buck on the side, whether it's kosher or not.

Along the way, you might get some nice stuff—but it won't ever fill you up inside.
You might get a high position—but it won't satisfy you.
“Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?”

We are not in exile. For the most part we are not Jews.
But the Gentile church can learn from the experience
of God's people in exile.

We who are called to be a holy people
also face the temptation to satisfy ourselves
with what the world offers and to compromise
our identity for the sake of convenience.
When we do that we risk missing out on the offer of God's abundant grace.
We risk not learning about the waters, the wine, the milk, that truly satisfies.

But in order for us to believe that this is something we can really experience
takes some courage.

Because what good is grace if it's all in your head?
How is this good news to Israel if they're just going to stay in exile?
They don't just need the idea of restoration,
they need to actually be restored to their land!

Isaiah knows this.

And so he declares two things on behalf of Yahweh:
First – a recognition that God's words and actions are completely distinct
from what could be expected from human words and actions.
Second – an oath that these words will not be uttered in vain.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

The idea here is that Israel cannot behave toward God
as they would toward a fellow human,
nor can they expect God to behave in that manner toward them.
Both what God thinks and what God does is entirely distinct
from what humans think and do.

And yet—through an indescribable mystery—
God gets down on the floor with us and kind of talks baby talk to us
so that in some way we get a glimpse
of God's grandeur, love, beauty, and kindness.

Because God is so beyond us, God's capacity to deliver on promises
also far exceeds all human abilities,
which leads to the second declaration.

The waters of the earth continue in their cycle without any way to stop them:
Oceans evaporate into clouds, which drop rain,
which forms rivers soak fields, which grows plants and grain,
and the rivers go out to the sea.

Just as this cycle is inevitable and impossible to stop,
so the word of God will not go out and be spoken in vain.
It will accomplish the purpose God has for it.
Not maybe. Not might. Will!

And when that purpose is accomplished, Israel will rejoice!
They will go out with joy and be led forth in shalom – in peace!
Led forth ... what does that sound like? It sounds like they're leaving.
Leaving for where? For their homes!
They will leave Babylon and return to the place of peace and wholeness,
the place of God's satisfaction.

And they did! They did return back to the promised land
as we read about in the book of Nehemiah.

But it wasn't enough to just be returned to the land.

The great twist of this drama was that the ultimate fulfillment
of promise would come not through a place, but a person.

A person who would be a faithful Jew unlike any other,
a promise receiver and a promise fulfiller,
one who would bring the nations
to bow before the Lord.

That person, that Messiah, is the one for whom we wait this Advent season.

The waters of God's peace flow from this Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

Drink deeply, and have courage – God's word will not return empty.