

Seek the Lord
Isaiah 55:1–13
John 4:13-14

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Pastor Doug Browne
December 17, 2017 (Advent 3)

Isaiah 55:1-13

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. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 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.

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. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

John 4:13-14

Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

The last three weeks have been concerned with the Babylonian exile, which seems kind of strange for Advent and preparing for Christmas. This week is the reason for that.

Since the events of last week, the Persian Empire, or present-day Iran,¹ under Emperor Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylon. Unlike King Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus was famous for

¹ Strictly speaking, equating the ancient Persian Empire with modern-day Iran is an oversimplification, but for these purposes it is close enough.

respecting the customs and religions of the people he conquered. He told the Hebrew people that they could go back home if they wanted to. Most of them did.²

Isaiah is preaching to these exiles just after they return home from Babylon. This is not a time of prosperity. Cyrus told them that they could go, but he did not exactly send riches with them. They arrive in Jerusalem, their parents' hometown but a place where they themselves have never been, with only the belongings that they could carry on their backs. The city has been largely destroyed by the Babylonians a generation earlier, and nobody has rebuilt it. All the social structures and institutions have to be rebuilt, and, just to top things off, all the best land has been grabbed by the people who were not sent into exile.³

In that context, Isaiah tells those returned exiles what God wants for them. God tells a desert people to come to the waters and drink. God tells penniless people to buy food and eat, that they do not need money. God asks them why they spend their money on things that they don't need, and work for things that do not satisfy them or anyone else?

Isaiah tells the people to eat what is good, and to listen to God and God's prophet.

Isaiah tells the people to seek the Lord. He tells them to leave wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts. He tells everyone to return to the Lord, so that the Lord can have mercy on them and abundantly pardon them.

The Lord our God is not playing a short-term game here, where the people looking at the ruins of Jerusalem could say, "Game over, we lost." No, that is not how the world works. God is persistent. God's covenant is from everlasting to everlasting with God's people.

² There is still a Jewish population in the area once known as Babylon, still seeking the welfare of the city there, but that's another story.

³ So they have disputes over landownership between families who used to own the land and the families that are currently living on it. The more things change in Jerusalem, the more they stay the same...

I got to thinking this week, what other messages do we hear about how the world works or should work?

With some help from a friend, I came up with a list of messages we hear about how the world works.

“Yo! Everybody! There’s more here than you could possibly ever eat! Come and get it, if you can pay. Take as much as you can pay for. Who cares whether what you’re buying is any good – buy stuff you don’t need, because your value as a human being is in how much stuff you accumulate. So hang on to your stuff, make sure it is protected at all costs.

“If you can’t pay for the food that you need, then pull yourself up by your bootstraps, because nobody will do it for you. God helps those who help themselves. Those people who were born rich, well, they must be better people than you and God must love them more than God loves you.

“That’s just the way the world works, and anybody saying anything different is some kind of a radical.

“Look out for yourself and keep focused on your goals, because your stuff and having power over other people are the only measure of success. They are the only reason that anyone will remember you after you’re dead, and that is the only reason to live.

“God can do anything God wants, and if you say all the right words, connect with the right ministry, or donate enough money to the right cause, you can tap into that power. It’s like magic.

“Oh, and don’t forget, you better forward all the right manipulative messages on social media, or God will get you.”⁴

⁴ Hat-tip for the idea and the start of that list to Pastor Own Cayton via Facebook.

Do these messages sound familiar?

I know that I hear them every time I turn on the TV, or the radio, or read the newspaper, or social media.

They. Are. Not. How. The. World. Works.

If that were how the world worked, then we would be preparing for the coming of an army. Sure, if enough people prayed long enough and said just the right words in their prayers, God would have come into the world, at the head of an invincible army of angels to wipe out all the enemies of God's people. Rome would have been destroyed in a flash of shock and awe. God would then sit down on a throne in Jerusalem, and rule the world from there, until God got tired of God's people not being worthy. Then God would either have destroyed all God's people, or waved a divine hand, wiped out human personality, and made all people slaves without even the pretense of free will. I figure that the whole thing would have taken maybe twenty-four hours.

That's not what I recall in the Bible, though.

God does not have a short attention span, even when we do.

The whole Bible, from Eden to the New Jerusalem, is a story of God working amazingly patiently with a people who do not deserve it, who sometimes seem to go out of their way not to deserve it, but whom God loves anyway.

God's people have this tendency to fall in love with stuff, or with power over other people, or both. God's people have this tendency to wander off from where we are supposed to be and from what we're supposed to be doing.

Our lives have days and weeks that feel like "Two steps forward and one step back" or, worse, "One step forward and two steps back." God has days like that with us, and months, and years.

But God is patient enough, and wise enough, to recognize that, if you look at it right, two steps forward and one step back, or even one step forward and two steps back, is not a disaster. It is not cause for despair. It's a cha-cha.⁵

God persists.

If we insist on dancing a cha-cha, God shrugs and dances with us, always working to draw us closer to being the people whom God always intended us to be. And, like the dancers in a cha-cha, God is only far away from us if we insist on messing up the dance.

God speaks God's word into the world, telling the whole world what the world will be like. The thirsty will be told to come to the water, and drink. The hungry will be told to come, buy food, even if they have no money. Everyone will have what they need, and no one will live in fear. This is God's peace and abundance, God's holy *shalom*.

This is more than empty words.

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cha-cha-cha_\(dance\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cha-cha-cha_(dance))

This is more than a wish.

This is more than God expressing a divine stylistic preference.

God says that this is how the world is going to be.

It may take a long time to make the world that way. The way there may be long and winding. But that's okay. One thing about being an immortal being, existing outside of time: God has all the time in the world.

That's why God did not start the redemption of the world with an angel army. It would have been easier, sure. It certainly would have been quicker. But it would not have been complete. We human beings would not have been part of redeeming Creation.

God wants the world to be redeemed, and God wants us to be part of the process. So, God did not send an army, to fix everything by force.

God did not send anybody.

God is very patient, but God got tired of our missteps. God came down here himself, to show us the steps of the dance. Jesus came down here himself, to show us how to live and how to love. And Jesus loves us enough, that, when it took dying a horrific, barbaric death to show us how much he loved us, he did it. And God the Father raised him from the dead, so that he could rule over the Earth with truth and grace.

That is what we are preparing for this Advent. We are preparing for the birth of a baby, and more than a baby. We are preparing for the birth of God into this world.

We are working toward the world being the way that God has told us it will be. If you look at the big picture, the world is closer to being what God intended than it has been since the tenants left the Garden of Eden.

That does not mean that we do not take backward steps.

We do.

Lord knows, we do.

But we continue the dance, and God is drawing us in the right direction.

So, as we prepare for Christmas, have faith, and look for ways that you can make the world just that little bit closer to what God intended.

If you can't feed all the hungry people in Columbus, feed one. If you can't help every person you see who needs help, help those you can. Because every little bit helps God to change the world.

AMEN.