

In our opening hymn we sang, “As the deer runs to the river parched and weary from the chase, we have come from hurt and hurry, thirsty for your healing grace. “

This is the third Sunday of Lent. We are 19 days into our Lenten journey. Are you thirsty?

The Israelites were. They were real thirsty. For their sins they were carried off into exile. Their lives were hard. They were in the longest drought of their lives. They had been in exile so long that they had adopted and assumed many of the ways of Babylon. They had been in exile so long they had forgotten much about a relationship with God. They didn't know to whom Isaiah was calling them. They did not know God. The Israelites were thirsty – perhaps physically, but more so spiritually.

Yet, God called out to them through Isaiah:

“Come and drink...all who for God's mercy plead! God's forgiveness, like a fountain, flows to satisfy your need.”

Come and drink, Isaiah says. First have water, and then let's celebrate with wine and drink nourishing milk – you are thirsty, come and drink. Let God give you what you need and more – more than the basics, God is offering abundance. Don't worry that you don't have any money- you don't need any for this feast that God is setting for you. And, it's not a simple soup God is offering either it's rich food - milk and honey, wine and oil, the fatted calves - images of the Promised Land that God is offering. Come, drink, eat – don't wait. How your God longs for you to have life, and have it abundantly.

That abundant life is yours today--whether or not you think you deserve it, whatever you have done or not done. Abundant life is yours, by God's grace and mercy. In Isaiah, hear God's invitation to eat and drink--and then, *after* the lavish celebration, the invitation to repentance... 'listen, so you may live...' etc."

It's after God's grace and mercy Isaiah's call to repentance is given. “Come *now*, Isaiah says, come *now* while the Lord may be found. Turn from your wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts.” Turn and live. Return to the one who created you. Return to the one who made us as beings who long for God.

Repent, turn away from false gods. Turn toward a God of truth. Turn away from injustice. Turn toward a God of justice. Turn from a God of hate. Turn toward a God of love. A God who provides abundantly, lavishly, richly for you.

How difficult repentance is when the turning is left to us. Difficult because it leads us to anxiety that we aren't good enough, that we haven't truly repented. This was the despair and anguish that Luther experienced – and rejected. Why? Because forgiveness is gift – pure grace – because God is merciful and longs for us and we are made as beings who long for God. Repentance does not get us forgiveness. Repentance is our response to God's forgiveness so generously given. So often we make repentance 'work' and that

leads us down the road of anxiety wondering “have I done enough”. Or we think of repentance as done under the threat of death, like the people Jesus is talking with, who are wondering if misfortune is punishment for sin.

Some people, the gospel says, ask Jesus about the Galilean’s who died at Herod’s hand while sacrificing in the temple. Jesus correctly understands their questions – as ‘Were they worse sinners than everybody else?’ Jesus says No. And he gives an example of his own: eighteen people who were killed when a tower fell on them – were they were offenders than all in Jerusalem? No, Jesus answers. It’s not about more or less sin.

Sin is sin, and, accordingly, in God’s justice, we are all guilty and condemned. Sin holds us back from being the people that God intends us to be. Sin gets in the way of a relationship with God, with our neighbor. Sin keeps us from bearing fruit.

In both Isaiah and Luke –God extends graciousness and mercy to the sinner. In Isaiah, God calls the exiled to a banquet – food and drink that will slake their thirst, fill their hunger. And, then, he calls for them to return to their Lord. Jesus says, “Your God is a generous God who does not punish people for their sins. Repent – turn to your God and live.

That’s why Jesus tells a parable. There is a fig tree that is expected to bear fruit that has yet to bear fruit. The owner wants to cut it down, but Jesus says – no, let me continue tending it. Let me dig around it and put manure on it. Let me have it for one more year and if it still doesn’t bear fruit, then you can cut it down. Jesus labors now in this garden.

God’s thoughts are higher than ours; God’s ways are higher than ours – God’s pardon and mercy – more abundant than we can imagine.

We live in the time of God’s laboring love, of Jesus tending the tree. God gives us more time to bear fruit and God gave us Jesus. God calls us to turn and behold life abundant. We turn because God is a gracious God who shows mercy. We turn because Jesus is in charge of us, of our care and nurture and growth. The gardener Jesus gives us living water. God calls us to return and we do turn. We turn because there is no other way to go...our ways lead only to thirst, to death. Jesus, the gardener, not only tended the tree, but died on the tree so that we have life, and have it abundantly.

(This is from next hymn)

Come, drink of the life-giving stream.

Let your thirst be quenched, your soul revived and live.

Amen.