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Isaiah 55:1-9

We have all had wilderness times in our lives. When life has changed and things are not as we want them to be. What kind of questions have you asked in those moments? Have you asked:

- Where are you, God?
- Why have things turned out this way?
- What do I believe?

Many of us – most of us – ask these kinds of questions at some time. The exact cause or situation varies, from person to person. When hardship or uncertainty comes, it is natural to wonder. We may long for justice – or forgiveness – or generosity. We may want other answers. And they do not always come quickly.

This is the kind of moment where we find the people of Israel. Today's reading from Isaiah comes from 600 years before Jesus' time. The people of Israel were cut off from their promised land. They lived in Babylon instead, trying to worship their God without Jerusalem, without the temple. God felt distant to them. They longed to hear a word of hope for the future: The possibility that their lives might return to "normal" again. They longed for a word from God that spoke of their special relationship.

God heard their longing, and answered. Through the prophet Isaiah, God reaches out a hand to Israel. Did they think they were alone? Were they hungry and longing for God? The prophet says:

“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)*

Do you long for something? Come to God, and be fed! Drink deeply of God’s cooling waters. You don’t have the money? That doesn’t matter! God offers free gift – no payment necessary. It’s a marvelous invitation from God, calling to mind wonders from earlier in Israel’s life: deliverance from slavery in Egypt, when God parted the Red Sea; the miracle of water springing from a stone, and manna raining in the desert. God answers the people’s longings with action. God feeds his people with what they need.

Our relationship with food is complicated, isn’t it? My son Peter is seven and a half months old, and he is still nursing. So what I eat needs to be enough to feed both of us. I find that what I choose to eat is not always helpful. Some times it’s hard for me to eat more vegetables when Thin Mints are in the room. The problem is that when I give into the cookie, I’m always hungry really soon afterward. What I

ate did not satisfy me. I may have eaten what I thought I wanted, but was not what I needed. Most of the time it's not what I really wanted, either, since I need to figure out what to eat shortly thereafter.

I'm not the only one who struggles with wants and needs. We all make choices every day. Some times they are not the most helpful ones. Isaiah asks, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" (55:2) Why would you eat that quick and easy cookie when I offer you so much more? When there is good food –healthy and rich food – that delights the tongue, satisfies hunger, and brings you life. Food that waits for you, within reach.

Food and water are not the only things that sustain our lives. Last week, our Sunday School kids were talking about wants and needs – as they relate to the story of the first sin. We discussed how there are give basic needs that are required for life – food, water, shelter, space, community. Most of us have those, even if they are not an ideal situation.

But we have other longings, don't we? A longing to tend to our souls. A desire for a sense of purpose in the world. A need to feel challenged – whether that's intellectually or physically.

Isaiah speaks to us: “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.” (55:2-3)

The food that God offers to us is sustenance that we can hear and see, taste and understand. For us Christians, this gift is the Word (with a capital W): which is proclaimed at our worship, and tasted at the altar, the Word witnessed in service to one another and to our neighbors. It is the word of love and grace, life and recreation. It is the word that we find in the Bible, in our worship gatherings, in Christian community.

This is the word that our youth were studying, as they prepared for last week’s Bible Bowl. Which people experience in fellowship and spiritual growth at our Wednesday night Lenten suppers. It’s what one of our students is exploring, as she prepares for her first communion in April.

We know that the Bible does not answer all our questions of life. Sometimes we need a ride or a friend or help learning to do something. But God and God’s Word can help us sort through our longings, to find God’s feast of blessing instead of the quick cookie.

Later in our text, the prophet says:

“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.” (55:6-7)

God invites us – with our questions and uncertainties; with our imperfections and confused desires. God invites us to bring all of ourselves and our lives to him.

When we seek God, call upon him, and draw near, our lives will change. Our hunger and thirst will be satisfied. Some old ways may need to be left behind. But our needs will be met in ways that are hard for us to choose alone.

Today God speaks to all of us, who long for full and whole lives:

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! [R]eturn to the Lord, that he may have mercy... call upon him while he is near. Listen, so that you may live. Amen.