

First Congregational Church Cannon Falls
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Isaiah 55:1-9
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

“Abundance”

Our entertainment these days is not without mystery, intrigue and stories of good versus evil. This motif is as old as literature itself. The Romans and Greeks wrote about it. Dante wrote about it. And we can't forget the truly American genre of entertainment called *The Western*. In Westerns, good versus evil are always at odds with each other. We cheer on the “good guy,” root for the underdog and celebrate when the evil one is overcome.

I have a few shows that fit that bill that I watch. One that is particularly intriguing is called “Heroes.” It was popular around the mid-2000's. I find it intriguing because, although there is definitely a “bad guy,” some of the characters' morality is a little more fluid. Sometimes they are fighting each other and then in the course of the story they become allies and help each other.

I find that is true in the real world as well. Most people are not all good and not all people are all bad. True, some are capable of horrific acts but more people are capable of love. So, the prophet's Isaiah's plea to “let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts,” rings true for a lot of humanity at one time or another. In other words, let us not condemn each other by a singular thought or action. Let us give each other a benefit of the doubt that some people are in fact able to change their ways. Shouldn't all of us be given that chance, especially to find our way to our merciful and forgiving God?

God keeps coming to us over and over again. God has not given up on us. We are not too broken or too hurt or too anything for God to give up on us. In fact, Isaiah writes, in a translation of the Bible called *The Message*, about God's call to us. God calls us to, “listen carefully to my life-giving, life nourishing words. I'm making a lasting covenant commitment to you, the same that I made to David: sure, solid, enduring love.” It is amazing that King David's reign carried so much significance in the lives of these Israelites some 400 years after his rule ended.

That sure, solid, enduring love is what held this group of Israelites together during their exile in Babylon, where we find them in today's reading. Babylon was the

capital city of Southern Mesopotamia built on the Euphrates River in what is now Iraq. They were taken from their beloved Jerusalem to Babylon as their temple and city were destroyed in 586 BCE when the elite of Judah were taken captive and displaced to Babylon. They lived there for two generations. At the point in the story that we read today, the Babylonians were captured by the Persians and their king, Cyrus. He freed the Israelites around 538 BCE, after almost 50 years in exile. In addition, the Israelites or their offspring were even given some money to help them return to Jerusalem. Despite some of the self-sufficient lives they had built, you have to wonder if their presence created some burden on this newly captured country.

What is amazing is that after all this time and in a foreign land, the Israelites kept their faith alive with story and prayers to their one God. They knew, in spite of their circumstances, that God had not abandoned them. Where some saw scarcity, others heard the promise of abundance. Yet, many were reluctant to return to Jerusalem. They had built homes and they had jobs. Under the Babylonians, they were even allowed to continue their worship of Yahweh, their God in a land where the religion was polytheistic, worshipping about 2100 deities.

Within their confines, they had worked hard to establish a life in their exile. They worked to put down roots in foreign soil. Much like many of the immigrants coming to our own country. Many work very hard to create a sense of home in a foreign land and save money to send back to family in their home country. Life for anyone emigrating to another country either by force or by choice is not easy. Yet for many, like the Israelites, they keep their faith and teach it to their offspring. And what the prophet Isaiah is telling us is that God, no matter where we are, maintains the covenant God has with His people. Theologian Corrine Carvalho writes, "The exiles' hopes rested in God's fidelity to that covenant. Israel would be restored, not for their sake but to show the world that God is in control of history."

Yet some lost their way in exile or became so comfortable in their new country that they could not imagine returning to Jerusalem. The city and its infrastructure had been destroyed when it was conquered. If they returned, how would they make a living, who would pay to rebuild, and would the return promise a new and better life?

Well, that is indeed what God is promising them – a better and abundant life. God promises “all who are thirsty, come to the water! Are you penniless? Come anyway-buy and eat! Come, buy your drinks, buy water and milk. Buy without money – everything is free!”

If you look at it, the reasons some of the Israelites did not return was because of money, success, businesses and homes they built. They were entangled in a world of competition and material comfort. A world that exists today. Some call a new “religion of the market.” Commentator Daniel Debevoise, writes, “This new religion is a juggernaut, a never-ending mass media, a Madison Avenue-driven machine that insists that we demand and are provided more and more, with no thought to the notion of ‘Enough.’”

So, yes, we have an abundance - of wants, of market driven needs, and an abundance of stuff. What God is promising is a different kind of abundance. God asks us in *The Message* translation, “why do you spend your money on junk food, your hard-earned cash on cotton candy? Listen to me, listen well: eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest. Pay attention, come close now, listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words.”

God is promising, even to the Israelites returning from exile, a life that is rich, full and nourishing to the soul. God promises an abundance of love, mercy and forgiveness. God promises, as he did to David, sure, solid and enduring love. God had set David up as “a witness to the nations, made him a prince and leader of the nations, and now I’m [God] doing it to you. You’ll summon nations you’ve never heard of, and nations who’ve never heard of you will come running to you because of me, Your God.”

In other parts in the book of Isaiah, the prophet talks about God doing a “new thing.” In God’s covenant with the Israelites and us, God is doing a “new thing” that is different than a “religion of the market.” God is promising us that we will be filled not with stuff but that which is life giving. God is asking us to reconsider spending our “money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy.” God will provide for what we need and will do so abundantly.

I remember a bumper sticker from many years ago that read, “whoever has the most toys wins.” Others live under a different philosophy that says that you can never have too much love. Maybe the idea of more love, less toys is what God is

asking of us? God asks us to listen carefully and “eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” If I were an editor of this scripture, I would add the word spiritual so that it reads “rich spiritual food.” God is promising to relieve our spiritual thirst as well.

Isaiah is reminding us, then, that for us to feel truly filled, to be truly sated, it is when we are in relationship with God and for us to keep seeking God as God keeps seeking us. Commentator Darryl Trimiew writes, “Ours is an age of reason, science and markets. These influences are important in their place, but God’s wisdom is not found in materialism. God’s ways are not our ways, nor are the Holy Spirit’s thoughts our thoughts. We, however, are like ships that could be firmly anchored, but who wish to set forth on our own adventures. At some point we find ourselves so far from God we cannot feel or hear [God].”

Like the Babylonian exiles, have we drifted away from God to the point that we cannot feel or hear God? Are we spiritually parched from our daily existence in the secular world? Like the characters on the TV show, “Heroes” we may not be all good or all bad in our attempts to be in relationship with God and with each other. Yet we may find that somehow, we are distanced from God for a variety of reasons. It is in that distance from God that we find ourselves starved and thirsty.

For us to be filled, God fills us with the hope that “For as the sky soars high above earth, so the way I work surpasses the way you work, and the way I think is beyond the way you think. Just as the rain and snow descend from the skies and don’t go back until they’ve watered the earth, doing their work of making things grow and blossom, producing seed for farmers and food for the hungry, so will the words that come out of my mouth not come back empty-handed. They’ll do the work I sent them to do, they’ll complete the assignment I gave them.”

What I hear then in this translation from *The Message* is that in our covenant with God, we have a role and responsibility as well. We are to bring the message of hope to others that in God’s abundant love for us, we are fed, nourished and our spiritual thirsts are quenched. May we bring this hope to a hurting world and into our own lives. Amen.