THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“On Earth As It Is In Heaven”* Isaiah 55:1-9

The words we just heard were first offered to a people who were hungry. They lived a long time ago, and yet their reality and ours continue to be the same, doesn’t it? There are still hungry people in the world.

Truth be told, as well fed as we are, we are still hungry, aren’t we? Aren’t we hungry for a world where all are fed and safe? Isaiah’s words are meant to ask us to consider this seriously. His words are also an invitation to join God in God’s desire that all people are fed and nourished, are welcomed into the abundance of the earth God has made, and the life God has given us.

For me, the immediate picture that this passage conjures for me is something that happened quite a few years ago. I had accompanied my friend, Leona, to a *Sam’s Club.* I do not remember why, I do not remember why we had gone there, or what we were looking for. For some reason the experience stands out quite vividly.

What I remember of the trip was being with that particular friend, and ending up in the produce section of the grocery store. It was years and years ago, so it must have been *Sam’s Club* near Leeward Community College. (I think that was the first one on the island.)

At any rate, I remember finding myself surrounded by what seemed like mountains of produce, more than I had ever seen in one place. Everywhere I looked, every direction, there were mounds-and-mounds of vegetables and fruits stacked-up around me. I especially remember the cabbages, but there were also tomatoes, and carrots, and peppers, and pineapples, and peaches, and on and on and on. Not only was there every kind of fruit or vegetable you can imagine, there was so much of *everything!*

*There was just so very, very much!*

To this day, I remember looking around me and thinking that with all of this much food in the world how impossible it was that there were hungry people in the world. There was just so much in that one store’s produce section. The fact that there was this much food in the world—and in this one place—and not every person in the world was able to share in it seemed ridiculous.

Clearly, the earth was able to bring forth such bounty. Clearly, we, as human agents, are able to successfully farm the earth and bring forth such abundance—and there are still children with distended bellies, with rickets? There are still whole generations of people in some countries with stunted growth because they did not had the nutrition they needed in childhood?

Admittedly, I was a lot younger then, and this was my first experience shopping in a warehouse-type store (like *Sam’s Club*) but it was shocking.

It seemed obscene.

It is still shocking. It is still obscene.

As I said earlier, the words we heard this morning from Scripture were Isaiah’s words offered to a hungry people. They were hungry in all sorts of ways—all of the ways in which human beings can be hungry—it was physical, but their hunger was also emotional and spiritual.

And so, Isaiah speaks to them of a God, and their life with God, in a world transformed by God’s grace and goodness. He speaks to them of hope, and the language he chooses is that of a world that overflows with the food that not only feeds, but feeds richly, abundantly, deeply.

However, this extravagant abundance of which Isaiah speaks is first and foremost a transformed *social* order, an order in which even those “that have no money” are able to secure not only life’s essentials (such as water), but also the rich abundance of wine and milk, the latter a luxury item that would ordinarily be available only to a privileged few.

During such times of unrest as the Israelites were experiencing in the waning days of their Babylonian captivity, such richness for the ordinary Israelite would have been even more exotic.

Thus, all of the abundance he speaks of is Isaiah’s way of communicating a deeper, more long-lasting truth. Although the prophet envisions a new social and economic order brought about by divine intervention, “the waters” to which God first invites the thirsty are meant to call to mind all of the places and ways in which God has rescued the people using some form of water.

And so, when invited to “the waters,” the Israelites (and we) are meant to remember the waters of creation, and how the whole world was drawn into being through God’s act of separating the waters from dry land.

We are meant to remember how God also rescued the whole world and gave it new beginning through the waters of the flood in the story of Noah and his ark.

We are meant to remember how Moses’ life was spared when he was hidden in a basket and floated down the waters of the Nile. Later, he would lead the whole nation of Israel to safety when God uses him to part the waters of the Red Sea. Still later, in the desert, he brings forth fresh water, sweet water from a rock so the people would not die of thirst in the desert.

All-in-all (because there are people who count such things) water is mentioned nearly 600 times in the Old Testament alone. The waters mentioned here, in Isaiah 55, are the life-giving waters that will allow the restored Israel to flourish in all aspects of its natural and social life.  Isaiah calls us to the waters so that we will remember the God of Abraham who has performed such wonders out of love for the people.

It seems God is always bringing the people into a new world, and a new life. We are to remember and renew our commitment to the God who has saved us so many times through water.

This is why Isaiah’s invitation to the Lord’s transformed economy is followed by a question, which also functions as a mild rebuke: *why do the people squander their precious resources for “that which is not bread” and “that which does not satisfy”?*

The prophet’s criticism presumably is leveled against those who, in captivity, are trading on a black market for nonessentials while ignoring the basics that would restore a legitimate economy and society back in Israel.  It is a question that should haunt all of us, even today, as should the invitation to:

*you that have no money,
   come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
   without money and without price.* [v.1]

I suppose the argument could be made that this vision and call were for another time, another place, another people, and that because of those things that separate us from the ancient Israelites, we are exempt from Isaiah’s words.

The thing is: there are still hungry people in the world, and we are people who are called to care about God’s love being present and real here on earth as it is in heaven. Indeed, as a people who receive the bread of life—Christ’s body—as our nourishment, the call to care for the hungry of the world becomes even more poignant and important.

But *how* are we to do it?

Isaiah answers us towards the end of this passage: *Seek the Lord,* says Isaiah. Seek—the call here is a call to inquiry and investigation. It is a call to see beyond our own circumstances and even our own interpretations, our own constructions, and especially our own opinions about hunger and hungry people. *Seek the Lord*—seek God’s creativity and inspiration. Seek God’s vision.

Seek God in the faces and the lives of hungry people, too. We are called upon to seek those who are hungry, to see them and to see the circumstances that cause them to be hungry.

Whether it is for food or justice or peace or equality, we are called upon to seek the Lord, seek *God’s* presence in the life of those in need of these good and life-giving things.

We are to seek what the Lord is asking of each of us as individuals, but especially all of us together as Nu’uanu Congregational Church. And, with Isaiah’s question ringing in our ears and stirring in our hearts, we are called upon to respond to what we have seen as people whose very heart and spirit have been fed and nourished by Christ’s body and blood—his very life.

To return to the produce section at *Sam’s Club* all those years ago: what it should be clear to all of us is that the hunger of the world is not a problem of capacity. The problem is distribution. There *is* enough to feed every man, woman, and child in the world.

The question is: do we have the will to do it? Will we spend our money and effort on that which *will* satisfy? Will we receive and honor God’s mission to care and to lift-up all who long to be filled with God’s grace and goodness? Will we allow ourselves to be the conduit for God’s love?

The past two years have been difficult ones for many people throughout the world. It has been difficult for us, too. Our good news, though, is that even through the difficulties we have had each other. More than that, we have had the presence of the Holy Spirit stirring deeply in our midst, moving us into new ways of being “church”—that is: new ways in which to be God’s called people—and because of that we will also, together, discover new ways in which to love and worship God by loving and caring for God’s beloved people.

Our good news is that our hunger for goodness and mercy is met by our God who is all goodness and mercy. And because of this, hope is real, and the blessing of God is possible.

In a few minutes, we will be told of one of the ways in which we may participate in God’s desire to care for people through our yearly contributions to One Great Hour of Sharing. I pray that as we listen to the presentation and consider what we will give, we will see God’s presence and respond with joy and generosity.

May this be the way of things for this morning, and for our whole lives. Amen.