

Not Idle Chatter! A sermon preached on the 4th Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2016 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: ISAIAH 55:1-11
LUKE 15:11-32

Ladies and gentlemen,
Boys and girls,
Come one come all
**Everyone who is thirsty,
Come, for here water is abundant
Everyone who is hungry, come for here is milk and
honey
No charge to you. It's free good people!**

As chapter 55 of Isaiah begins, the prophet sounds like a street vendor making a pitch
I wonder why he does this—why this sort of invitation
Is he trying to get his readers' attention—for good street vendors do just that!

Even if you do not buy what they are selling, their pitch makes you curious—you are drawn in

Well, I believe that is precisely what Isaiah wants to do—to draw in his readers
I've got important things to say—things of the Lord,
Things that God wants you to hear, learn and inwardly digest....

*There's a new and fresh wind blowing through your lives—
and it is nothing less than the voice and promises of the living God
Changes are a comin'!*

You know the life you have been living,

The life you have had to live in Babylonian captivity—well that’s on the way out—because the Babylonians are on the way out

Their hold over you is waning and will in short time disappear.

That being the case, who are you going to choose—which way are you going to go—the new future now being offered by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—because he is not dead,

Nor has he been defeated by the moldy old Babylonian gods.

Or,

Do you really want to stay with the empire which exploits, coerces and oppresses?

The empire that denies dignity, freedom and security?

The empire that never yields abundance and joy—at least for you?

The empire in which life resources are always expensive, grudging and unsatisfying?

The empire for which the way of life is ultimately death!

Here in chapter 55 Isaiah uses a series of rhetorical questions to get his readers to think carefully about their choice—God or Babylon; the living Lord of time and history or the world’s power

**Vs.2 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.**

Why would you invest so much in forms of life that cannot work?

Why work so hard and so long in ways that give no satisfaction?

Why give you lives over to the demands and rewards of the empire that yields nothing of value in return

In essence, why settle for “Babylonian junk food” when you are offered the rich and sustaining food of God’s love, care, mercy grace and forgiveness?

Now, says Isaiah you have what you have always had and continue to have—choice!

Move into the new future offered by God or stay with what you know—more submissiveness to Babylon that yields nothing to your well-being.

I wonder how many refused to move into the new future because they were afraid to leave the known and familiar.

I wonder how many today refuse to turn to the Lord or never take up the challenge to come, follow Jesus because the familiar just seems better.

Isaiah is not finished with his street vendor patter in announcing some very good news about God’s involvement, God on the move.

In verses 10-11, Isaiah declares that God’s word of promises does indeed have consequences.

God’s word does produce real outcomes in public life.

To emphasize that this is indeed the case—Isaiah uses two images-rain and snow.

Rain and snow are not phantoms or make believe Both are real, forceful powers that produce something tangible on the earth—growth, and life and future.

In a like manner says Isaiah,

God’s word is not religious fantasy or idle chatter!

When used and applied in everyday life, it too produces growth and life (spiritual) and a meaningful future.

Snow and rain are very effective—so is the word of God!

In the early years of the Christian church—4th and 5th century—one of the most influential Christian

theologians and philosophers was St. Augustine

His most famous work City of God is not light reading for most,

But it was and it remains foundational to Christian doctrine and understanding of the work of God in Christ.

One declaration by St. Augustine has stuck with me a long time and it is as true today,

As it was when he penned it.

It is from his other landmark book—Confessions.

Thou[God] hast made us for Thyself, O Lord and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.

One of the key ways we rest in God remains, the study, reflection, entering, and living according to his Word in scripture.

What is God saying to us personally by a particular story? Or proverb or piece of counsel of advice.

To not even attempt to answer that question in an intentional way and on a regular basis—meaning you read your Bible—is to play at being a Christian!

To answer that question in an intentional way and on a regular basis will require persistence—for we all live in a busy world,

We are all busy people with ever growing to do lists.

But to put off or delay spending regular time in the Word as some of my colleagues phrase it,

Is to deny ourselves this great gift from God.

It is to move away from God as centre and turn toward that insidious and life-deadening perspective that believes life centres around us!!

This morning, as love is the theme for the 4th Sunday in Advent,

I have picked a story from scripture that speaks about love—love of God, love of God for us, love of God for us shown to others and lived out in our everyday lives.

I want us to enter in and to consider this story—what might it be saying to us,

What are the things about God and ourselves it raises in our life.

You can do this with any piece of scripture—that's its gift—the eternal nature of God's word that speaks to us as much as it did to his first hearers and readers of previous generations,

And to do this will produce results—growth, illumination, understanding, perspective...

The story I have chosen is one of the best known of Jesus' parables.

It is the one I grew up knowing as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Part of a triad of parables that centre on lostness—the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son.

First, a word of caution about entering into any of the parables.

When Jesus used the parables, it was for some other purpose than simply conveying information.

Second, the parables are stories of the world as it is, not the as it ought to be.

When read they may well cause not so nice reactions to surface in our lives—the Prodigal Son parable certainly does for me

By causing those reactions to surface,
They reveal dimensions of ourselves that we try our best to ignore or suppress
In other words,
The stories in scripture so often reveal to us something about the kind of persons we are and why we need the kind of redemption Jesus brings.

To the parable of prodigal son then
In my own reflection these weeks past and in recent history, I am much helped by the painting projected behind me

And two books about the parable—Tim Keller. The Prodigal God—you will remember that a few years ago, some of us did a study on this book

The late Henri Nouwen wrote this book The Return of the Prodigal Son. A story of Homecoming.

The painting—Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn's The Prodigal. (1668)—believed to be one Rembrandt's last paintings before his death.

The original hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg Russia.



Lots of things portrayed in this painting, as befits the parable—lots of things happening in it.

Rembrandt has frozen a moment in the story—the reconciliation between the father and the wastrel and now returned younger son.

Older and angry older brother stands to the right.

Light—while the father and the kneeling younger son are bathed in light with the rich cloak of the father contrasted with the beggary appearance of the younger son (sandals, clothes)

Only the downcast and infuriated face and the tightly held hands of the other brother are lit!

Unconditional forgiveness by the father is contrasted with absence of any sort of forgiveness for his younger brother by older brother.

As I enter into the story Veronica read,

Look at the painting—I wonder
 What is going on in little brother's mind?
 I wonder is he honestly repenting of his cruelty to his
 father—wishing him dead
 I wonder what is going on in the Father's mind
 I wonder that is going in the older brother's mind.
 I wonder will he be able to put aside his anger—clearly
 spelled out in the text from Luke,
 Or will he continue to judge his brother as unforgiveable.
 I wonder, must forgiveness always be unconditional to be
 forgiveness.

Fretful, hardworking, decent, dot all the I's
 cross all the t's older brother comes home from his hard
 labour on the farm, and learns that a party is being given
 because the wastrel of a younger brother has decided to
 come home now, now that the money has run out.
 To add insult to injury, I wonder is the older brother's
 reaction in part owing to the truth that Dad is spending his
 older son's eventual inheritance.
 Is this just—I wonder.

What does it say about us, if like the older brother,
 we become angry when other people get a break?
 I wonder what it says about our value system and our love
 of neighbor when that kind of older brother reaction
 surfaces in us
 I wonder what this says about the depth and faithfulness to
 Jesus as our personal savior and we say we have repented,
 yet still involuntarily react in such an older brother way.

I wonder when we are confronted by our standoffish
 anger—do we react as the older brother does with his
 father's plea to be 'part of the party', to join in.

I wonder if I like the older brother have bought into the belief that if I do all the right things, keep all the rules, be a good little boy, life should always be fair and just.

Nothing nasty will happen.

Well, here in the Father's call for a party is a nasty for the older brother.

As I let this parable continue to work in and on me,
Become the 'rain and snow come down from heaven
(Isaiah 55:10)

I see and wonder deeper things

I see the Father as God

I see both brothers have run from God—from the tender hands of blessing—younger brother in searching for love everywhere, except the only place he will find it

Thou[God] hast made us for Thyself, O Lord and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.

To again quote St. Augustine.

Am I in many ways like younger brother—to whom do I belong—To God or to the World.

And then older brother—distancing himself from the invitation to come to the party, be part of the Father's blessing and thankfulness

Bitterness, feeling hard done to, anger, self-righteousness—that too is running away from the blessing of God—the hands of the Father on my shoulders

I am reminded again by this story is that one of the greatest challenges in the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness.

I wonder, what is it that keeps so many of us clinging to our sins and prevents us from letting God erase our past and offering to us a completely new beginning. The older brother's tightly clasped hands in the painting show me that he is not willing to let God be God—let the Father bless him!!

Is this me?

I am reminded as well that God does not compare us with any other. He knows us intimately, as the Father in the parable knows his two sons.

Both require his blessing and healing. And the Father's love is unconditional love—can I handle this?

Or am I still going to persist in believing that I have TO DO SOMETHING to earn God's love.

Again to the painting, though it is clear the more often you read the story in Luke.

The Father's hands are completely bathed in an almost ethereal light.

The Father God who from the beginning has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing.

Those arms of his never drop or droop in despair, but are always reaching out hoping that his children—each and every one of us—will return to him if they have strayed, so that he (God) can speak words of love to them, to us, and so that he can bless them, us.

**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,
11 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.**

It's so very true isn't it—taken seriously and with intentionality,

Entering in scriptures, spending time with them in a reflective and prayerful way—really does show that God's word does not return to him empty

For among other things as we let the scriptures enter our lives, they really do probe the dark corners that each of us has in our lives,

They break open our last defenses and dismiss our rationalizations and self-justifications, and expose us to yes, the searing, but always cleansing and loving light of the grace of God.

The scriptures--the gift of God, for the people of God.