

Feasting Abundantly

This morning marks the third Sunday of lent. Lent is the time of preparation for the season of Easter. It is when we hold in tension the pain and damage that exists in this world while also looking with hope and anticipation of what is to come. It is the time of the church year when we are reminded that we are mortal beings and one day our bodies will return to the earth. During this season, many of us choose to begin a new practice as we seek to grow closer to God while others of us practice some sort of fasting as we hunger and thirst for God's presence among us. It is the time of year where we collectively acknowledge what is missing, what hurts, how many people hurt – we look at the inequality all around us, the broken relationships and the need for God's often transcendent presence to come near to us. Lent is also a time of great hope and anticipation. It is a time of looking toward things promised, a time of turning. It is a time of affirming together that God is at work in the world and there will be wholeness, that wounds are being healed all the time. During Lent, we show up in spaces just like this one time and time again to get a glimpse of God, hear a word of good news, and affirm as a community that in God none of us is alone

Years ago, before the spaces of the world were so easily collapsed into one another – before telephones, cars, planes, and yes internet – before someone in

South Africa could Skype with someone in America – seeing faces and speaking in real time, before we could see and touch and travel quickly to new destinations – before we moved all around for jobs and pleasure. For the most part, people stayed together in the same place. In their groups, people looked alike, thought alike, spoke the same language, practiced the same traditions. People needed community. They depended on one another for everyday survival and for protection.

In today's lesson, we encounter Isaiah delivering a message of great hope to a people whose hope has been tattered, a people in exile. We listen in as Isaiah speaks words about a great feast – wine and bread that cost nothing. It's an enticing message - promises of accessible abundance, of God's attention, and of restoration. But, I imagine even in the hearing of these promising words, the people are acutely aware of their separation from home. They are acutely aware of being in a strange land, surrounded by strange people, strange traditions, strange everything. They are acutely aware of their aloneness and they are, I imagine, acutely aware of their distance from God. So we find the people of God this morning in a state of Lenten awareness. They are given words of hope in a land they do not know as they long for their home.

Isaiah invites them to be filled; tells them they can buy and eat rich foods with no money. He asks them why they are working so hard for food that will not keep them full. But, what exactly is he promising them? What is this event he's inviting them to and how do they get to be a part of this great feast? "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters: and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!... Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good... Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live." Did you hear that? Listen carefully, Incline your ear, listen. In only two sentences, we've been instructed 3 times. Listen up – here's how you live! Now these are important words to a people in exile, a people feeling less than alive as they have been estranged from everything they know and live for. Isaiah tells them, listen up - here is how you live, here is how you get your ticket to the feast. "So that you may live I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David." God is claiming God's covenant with David a binding love agreement for the people in exile. God is calling to them through Isaiah, reminding them of the great works, unwavering presence and power God showed through the Davidic dynasty. You feel weak now, displaced now, remember I am the God of life. I am the God of your ancestor, the great king David. I am with you. Reminding them of a time their people felt secure and strong, God claims presence with them now and tells them what it means to

really live. “So that you may live I will make with you an everlasting covenant...see, you shall call nations that you do not know and nations that do not know you will come running to you because of the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, for he has glorified you.”

So that you may live, I will make with you an everlasting covenant – I will give you my steadfast and sure love – for your part, you must call out to others - you must welcome others into this life. Life with God means being a witness – or if you’ll allow me – a blessing to others. Does this sound familiar?

It is a story that flows throughout the Biblical narrative. A story that begins with Abram and Sarai as God calls them out of their homeland to go to a new land that God will show them. If you will, remember the story with me for a few moments. God calls Abram and Sarai, a well to do, older couple living in the city of Ur, to leave all they know - to leave their people, their culture, their land, their safety - to go to a new place that is everything and everywhere they don’t know. In their going, in their stepping out of all they know and trusting God to lead them, God makes a promise to the couple – God will bless them, and will make of them a great nation - *so that they might be a blessing*. Brian McLaren puts it this way, “Not only will they be blessed, but they will be a blessing. Not only will their family become a great nation, but all the families on earth will be blessed through

them. This is a unique identity indeed... Abram and Sarai's unique identity will be us for them, us with them, us for the benefit of blessing all."

The great nation God promised to make of Abram and Sarai is the people that Isaiah is speaking to in exile, it is the same nation being remembered in the Davidic dynasty, it is the same nation that continues to be loved by God and called to love by God. Here again today, in all the promises the people hear, we might remember that God made the promise of a nation before there was any land to identify that nation. As the people of God are away from their homes and all they know, they are reminded of God's promises, and of what makes them who they are. They are reminded of what really gives them life. It is not place or wealth or status that gives life, it is not land or possessions, or even safety. It is relationship with God and one another. Isaiah shows up this morning to remind us that God is here... even in our exiles... God has not forgotten us. So that you might have life, I will make a covenant with you and you will call the nations. God is for us so that we might be for others. The community of God is one of belonging.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus who invites those who are exempted from so many tables to eat at the table with him. Jesus who is known in the breaking of the bread and the blessing of the

wine. Jesus who makes an abundance out of almost nothing and feeds thousands of people. Jesus who heals so that people might be restored to life in community. Listen, so that you may live I will make with you an everlasting covenant... and you shall call nations that you do not know and nations that do not know you shall run to you because of the Lord your God.

Lent is a time of looking at ourselves individually for the sake of greater community. Jesus' work showed this beautifully as he lived his own life, risked his own life, gave his own life, for the sake of affirming the lives of all. He risked being disgraced so that others could be recognized. And that is really what we are being called to do in this passage today. We are being called, not just to partake in the feast, but to make space for others at the table.

Years ago, before the spaces of the world were so easily collapsed into one another – before telephones, cars, planes, and yes internet – before someone in South Africa could Skype with someone in America – seeing faces and speaking in real time, before we could see and touch and travel quickly to new destinations – before we moved all around for jobs and pleasure, people stayed together in the same place, for the most part. People who lived together looked alike, thought alike, spoke the same language, practiced the same traditions. People depended on one another for everyday survival and for protection.

Today, we live in a world where people of different races, who speak different languages, who are from different parts of the world live in the same neighborhood, cross the same streets, shop at the same markets and depend on one another for almost nothing. Today we live in a world where we are more connected than ever and in many ways, more separate than ever. We prize individualism, yet we crave community. Today, with more access than ever to people, we still know what it is to be alone. But we were not created to be alone. Listen so that we may live. Listen, God is calling us all to relationship. Listen, God is expecting us to call others in too. God is still calling out to us to build community, to bless others, to invite people to the table – to feast abundantly on the steadfast love of the lord that is God’s promised presence. God is still calling us to love and bring others to the table.

Lent is the time when we take a closer look at ourselves. It is a time to practice those things that will bring us closer to God. It is a time to fast from those things that make us forget God’s abundance. This season may we all take some time to search ourselves, to recognize God's presence among us and to offer God's goodness to people we meet. May we look to be places of belonging in our congregations. And May we anticipate the life giving community that is all around us. Amen.