

Isaiah 55:1-9

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. 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. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

See, 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, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

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. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Nor are Your Ways My Ways - March 20, 2022

Isaiah 55:1-9

As a pastor, one of the most common questions I get is why. Why is there war in Ukraine? Why did I get sick? Why was I fired from my job? Why won't my friend speak to me? Why, in short, isn't life going the way I want to be?

And that's certainly a reasonable question, isn't it? We all have ideas about how our lives ought to be and I think it's safe to say that there are times, perhaps many times, when things are not going the way we think they should be going. Perhaps it is in our relationships, perhaps our jobs, perhaps our health. I expect most of us could find something to complain or fret about.

I'm hardly saying that fretting or complaining about life is not normal or even not justifiable! I don't know anyone who has a perfect life. I don't know anyone who doesn't have something on their minds. Few people simply go along with everything that happens. And that's OK.

However, the issue is when things aren't going our way, what exactly are we complaining about and to whom or to what are we complaining?

When these words from the prophet Isaiah were first written, the people were in a state of confusion. People were experiencing a mixed bag of good and bad. On the good side, many people were in the process of moving, moving back to Jerusalem from the city of Babylon. A generation before, many Israelites were forcibly removed from Jerusalem when the Babylonians invaded and destroyed it. For decades, thousands upon thousands languished in captivity, questioning everything they knew and the life they once had. Israelites were questioning their faith, even their God because they were coming to some painful conclusions about their lives.

The Israelites back then were no different from us day in that they were reluctant to admit they made some serious mistakes. They did not like admitting they ended up in Babylon, in exile, because they were continually disobeying God's law. In short, the Israelites made choices, many bad choices, that resulted in the destruction of their way of life.

I wonder how often we living today have similar conversations with ourselves? First of all, I am not blaming the victim. Many things, many terrible things have happened and are happening to us over which we have no control. We all know that bad stuff happens to us just because it does and there is nothing we can do about it.

On the other hand, we do ourselves a major disservice when we refuse to examine ourselves and hold ourselves accountable, at least partially, for our situations in life.

Every week, we say a Prayer of Confession. During the prayer, we take a moment of silence to reflect on our lives and our choices. The reason why say the Prayer of Confession and place it at the beginning of the service is because the rest of our worship makes no sense unless we start by confessing our sins to ourselves, to others, and to God.

A few decades ago, much of Christian preaching consisted of reminding people of their sins and calling them to repent and turn back to God. In other words, the church was in the business of selling guilt. If you make people feel bad enough, they'll come to God.

Now, I am not in the business of guiltting you into following Jesus Christ. Frankly, I think that approach is not a strong foundation for lasting faith. I don't want anyone to make anyone feel bad. I don't know if I could believe in a God who delights in making me feel bad.

On the other hand, to have faith, to follow Jesus is to continually recognize that we are in relationship with God all the time. Faith is not an "on demand" or "as needed" thing. Unfortunately, many people in fact see faith in God exactly that way: we get in touch with God only when we feel like it or when we are in some kind of crisis.

Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't call on God when we're in trouble, far from it. However, if we treat our relationship with God the same way we treat our relationship with aspirin -- take when needed -- we are creating the dangerous illusion that most of the time we really don't need God in our lives. We're saying to ourselves, "OK, 90% of the time or more, I'm fine on my own, God, let's keep in touch."

Which is the better plan? To exercise a bit every day so when you need to be strong or need physical endurance you'll be able to? Or do you choose not to exercise at all in the hope that you will never need to do anything strenuous? The truth is that we will have physical demands placed on us when we least expect them. Isn't it better to be ready than to fall flat on our faces finding out we weren't?

Such is the nature of our long term relationship with God. If we only call on God when there are problems, I fear that we will find ourselves constantly disappointed by God, by the church, by fellow believers. Those who have a part-time relationship with God assume that God is like Superman, flying around the world looking for trouble, and swooping in to fix everything. Of course, when it doesn't happen, when we don't get the results we want, when God seems to fail us, we find ourselves thinking that God really isn't there and God really doesn't care.

One of the saddest things I encounter as a pastor is the belief, even among Christians, that God does not care about us. God is somewhere far away, up in the clouds, disconnected with our reality. For some, perhaps some in here, prayer is a useless exercise because we may feel like we're just saying words and thinking thoughts that aren't going anywhere.

Here's what is going on: Every one of us has our own ideas about God and we therefore project our ideas about God onto some version of God who may or may not exist. In fact I can say that none, none, none of our personal versions of God actually exists. Not yours and not mine. Why?

Because nobody can know everything about God. Hey, there is not a single human being who knows everything about himself or herself! When it comes right down to it, we don't know ourselves well at all. So, if we don't know even ourselves, how can possibly know much about God, especially if we don't make an effort to find out more about God?

When people tell me they don't believe in God or they don't believe in organized religion then I ask them who do you think God is? What do you think the church is supposed to be? In short, what are your ideas?

And you know folks, when it comes right down to it, few people have really spent much time thinking about or reflecting on their relationship with God or thinking about how the church should work. Most people simply go back to a time when they prayed and nothing happened or they went to a church and felt uncomfortable.

The truth is that for even the most dedicated believer, prayers have not been answered the way they want them to be. For even the most ardent church goer, they have had negative experiences in church. But is our reaction to reject God and reject religion because it did not conform to our ideas of how they ought to work? I mean, you could use your smartphone as a hammer, I guess, and just get frustrated when it doesn't drive a nail and just ends up broken. Would you say smartphones are useless because I can't use them as hammers? Of course not!

Likewise, thinking that God should conform to my personal expectations or all congregations should operate the way I want them to presumes that we know everything about God and we know every congregation and we are right about everything and everyone else is wrong.

It is easy to dismiss God and it is easy to dismiss the church when there is no way they can possibly satisfy your expectations, even if you don't know what your expectations should be.

But what if your expectations are wrong? What if much of what you think about God and think about the church does not square with what God says about God and what God says about the church? What then?

Our passage from Isaiah today speaks to the concerns of Israelites returning to Jerusalem after being in exile for a generation. They were coming back to a home they did not know. They didn't know what to expect, and many were disappointed in what they found.

But in this passage, God lays out really all we need to know about God. The first thing is we are welcome. Yes, God welcomes everyone, regardless of their situation, to come and eat and drink for free — in short, celebrate life with God. Second, God tells us we are special. God not only wants a relationship with us, but God tells we are each precious and special to God. Third, God is always willing to start over again with us. God loves us so much that God wants to show mercy and wants to pardon us. Of course, that means nothing unless we think we need to be pardoned or we want to have a relationship with God. Nevertheless, God promises that whenever we call, God will be there.

But the final thing God tells us is perhaps the hardest to accept. God tells us flat out that God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. In short, God is God and we are us and that is the way it is and that is the way it has to be.

So who is in charge? Us or God? If present events are any indication, the answer should be fairly obvious. With war, climate change, racism, Covid, and so much else going on, who can reasonably claim that human ways are superior to God's ways?

In our scripture, God is giving Israel a chance to recover from their own mess and start over again. In fact God is always completely open to any of us starting over again at any time. Isn't that what this season of Lent is truly about: reflecting on our relationship with God and rededicating ourselves to restoring and rebuilding that relationship?

Friends, our lives are far too complex and facing far too many challenges to think we can possibly manage them on their own. The stress is overwhelming us all. But the good news is that we are not alone, the door is always open as long as we remember that God's ways are not ours but they are always, always, always better.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.