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Isaiah 55

*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?*

*Seek God while he may be found,
call upon her while she is near;
for God will abundantly pardon.
“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways,”
says God.*

*“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

These words of Isaiah are words of hope to exiles sitting in a foreign land. As refugees, distraught, displaced and distanced from the place that connected them to God, they heard these words as God's 'nevertheless all shall be well' in their disheveled and disrupted lives. This is a word to those of us who don't have it all together, even thousands of years later. We may not be removed from our geographical homeland; but at times we feel unmoored, adrift at sea, living in a country that seems strange and unchecked, a land that sometimes feels more like an oligarchy than a democracy.

The good news from the prophet is this: the only thing that can exclude us from the presence of God is ourselves. Isaiah tells us that God has created this extravagant banquet called life that surrounds us at every point, at every moment, and it is free for the taking. But because we are suspicious of things that are free, believing the adage that there is no such thing as a free lunch, we usurp God's place by wanting to be in charge of the banquet ourselves. We want to be the host. We want to

control the menu; we want to choose the location; we want to make up the guest list. We want to blame others if the party of life fails to meet our expectations. Our hubris dupes us into thinking we can do a better job. In so doing, we exclude ourselves from the feast of life that God has given us.

(Carol L. Schnabl Schweitzer, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Volume XXI, No 2)

This world that surrounds us each day is the banquet table of God's 'Nevertheless.' We may feel alone and lost, exiled from the mainstream of life, floundering in the wilderness, afraid of the changes that require of us faith, haunted by the past, boxed in by societies prejudices, but God says "Nevertheless, come to this life that is free and open to all, where you can meet others who are lonely and others who will welcome you with open arms, and others who have traveled on similar journeys and who will shed some light on yours and walk with you when the pathway seems obscure.

Sometimes we self-select out of God's party because we are prejudiced against those who are there, angry that God allows anyone in, upset that the guest list includes people we don't understand, jealous that we who have been good, moral and upright citizens of this world and God's kingdom are not rewarded with a better seat at the head of the table than those whom society incarcerates or ignores. But God so loved the world. God says: nevertheless, this table is for you. It is for them. Trust me with this, for you can't understand my ways nor do you see the whole picture. This table is for the birds, it is for the pigs, it is for those people you don't like and it may serve food you don't like, but all of this is expansive for your beleaguered and exiled soul, all of this is created by your host to nourish you.

We may want life to be perfect, to be consistent and fair, to play by the rules we have assumed God has adopted because they are the rules we think universal. But God says: nevertheless, you live in an imperfect world and that's ok. I created an imperfect world. You assume that I have the power to change things and the will to change things according to your likes and dislikes, according to your conveniences just because you pray earnestly. Nevertheless, your ways are not my ways. In fact, my ways are so far above your ways that the farthest galaxies a million light years away can't begin to be a measuring rod for the gulf between your finite understanding and my finite wisdom. Nevertheless, it's ok. Just relax. Enjoy the wine I've made for you. Take a breath of my refreshing air. Watch the sunrise or the sunset. Commune with my world and the people in it. Listen to my soothing music that may come from the meadowlark or the cry of a baby. All of this calls you to new possibilities.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *An Altar in the World*, reminds us that earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars. Everywhere we turn there is an altar that is God's banquet table. Taylor commends us to discover the sacred in the small things we do and see, from simple practices such as walking, working and prayer. Something as ordinary as making eye contact with the cashier at the grocery store becomes a moment of human connection in which we see another version of God's face. It is an altar of divine presence. She invites us to pay attention to what we're doing and take time to notice the sights, smells and sounds that are around us, from washing the clothes, to driving to work, to fixing dinner, to paying the bills. We may not think of these as altars of the sacred; nevertheless, they are.

A friend of mine is learning to reframe the annoying buzz of the alarm clock in the early morning that calls him to wake. He is trying to hear it, not as noise, but as invitation to a new day, new possibilities, as the voice of something exciting that ushers him to a new menu at the banquet table

from which he may partake for his day's pleasure.

So come to the banquet that is prepared. It begins at this table, with this cube of bread and this thimble of wine. But this is not the end; this is a beginning. This is the place to practice the presence of God so we'll be open to seeing and hearing and tasting the extravagant banquet that awaits us each moment of our lives, in the ordinary activities of the day.

Isaiah concludes:

*For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn bush you expect shall nevertheless come up the cypress;
instead of the brier that you anticipate shall nevertheless come up the myrtle tree.*

Whatever limits us, God always has a corresponding Nevertheless. God's Nevertheless is a word of hope, of renewal, of nourishment. Amen.

--Gary McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Today we come with our blessings, even though we are all too often thoughtless of them. We fill our lives with the smoke of our complaining, making ourselves and those around us unhappy, when within our grasp are myriad opportunities that are beautiful, excellent, and worthy of our notice. Open us up to the blessings that nurture and sustain us.

Even in the midst of our blessings our hearts are heavy for those who are victims of forces out of their control. We think of the thousands who have been affected by the tsunami in Indonesia. Console the grieving, give strength to the survivors, and empower those who are bringing aid to them.

We also think of the victims of abuse and bullying at the hand of those who have power and money and position. We are abhorrent of the stories of children abused by clergy and women abused and harassed at work, at school, at offices, and wherever they are subjected to those who manipulate them for personal gain and pleasure. May these stories open our eyes and hearts to be ever the more sensitive in our own relationships that we might be keen to prevent such situations.

Today we come with our prayers for those most in need of your care and love. Be close to those who we've mentioned and those unknown to us; be ever the holy comforter to those who have suffered the pangs of death; be near to those who are confined at home or facility; those in jail and prison, those in mental institutions or who live in bodies that don't respond.

Lead us ever in the light of whatever event calls us into a holy presence that we may help affect a realm of righteousness and peace on this earth. Amen.