

“Feeding Our Faith”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Lent III – March 24, 2019

**Isaiah 55: 1-9**

How do we know when we are hungry? Our stomach growls. Our head starts to hurt. Our brain sends signals that it is craving something savory, sweet, or some sort of protein. We don't have a lot of patience, and perhaps snap at someone who asks us a simple question. At our house, we've adopted the cultural phrase “hangry” to describe this phenomenon. It's also how our cat and dog act when there is no food in their respective bowls.

How do we know when we are thirsty? Our mouth gets dry, and our tongue becomes pasty. Our head starts to hurt. If we've been doing some sort of physical work – yardwork outside, exercise indoors, etc. – then we will be perspiring from head to toe. Our clothing will be soaked with wetness and stains, as our bodies lose moisture and are in need of replenishment.

Sometimes, though, we don't always recognize when we are hungry or thirsty. Or we mistake one for another. I was talking about this with a friend this week, and he commented that many times, what we interpret as hunger pains are actually signs of dehydration. Instead of filling our bodies with water, we fill them with snacks and food, which instead of satisfying our thirst, add more weight to our bodies.

Daniel DeBevoise writes: *In the southwestern United States, where the humidity is low, you may be thirsty and not even know it. Your perspiration evaporates so quickly that you do not realize you are becoming dehydrated. So, whether you feel thirsty or not, you drink a little water as often as you can. In Grand Canyon National Park there are signs strategically placed along the trails that remind you to stop and drink water. (The signs read) “Stop! Drink water. You are thirsty, whether you realize it or not.”*

*How could it be that we do not recognize our own thirst? There are times when we are intensely aware of our needs and desires, including the things we thirst for, and other times when we do not feel the need or desire for anything in particular. Isaiah's words are like the sign in a dry climate – “Stop! Drink water. You are thirsty, whether you realize it or not.” We need to hear and respond to Isaiah, but not on the basis of what we may feel about ourselves at any particular moment. Isaiah is telling us something true about ourselves at every moment of our lives* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 74-76).

When Isaiah wrote this prophecy, it was at a time of exile for the Israelites. They had been taken away from their homeland by the Babylonians, as they had forsaken God in their faithful obedience. They had lived in Babylon for over sixty years, in a foreign culture, under foreign rule, and for many, they had likely forgotten what home truly was. As I shared with the

Bible Study on Tuesday, this passage is actually written at the end of that exile, as soon the Israelites would return home to their promised land. That context helps to explain more of the imagery which Isaiah uses in this passage.

As residents in a foreign land, the Israelites would have likely paid exuberant prices for the basics of life: bread, wine, milk, etc. The Lord sets forth a new vision of how they might live as God's people: "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" (55:1). Instead of filling themselves with food that only satisfies for a brief time, they are invited to "eat what is good, and delight themselves in rich food" (55:2). For that food is not what can be bought in the marketplace, but is the Word of God, a spiritual nourishment which lasts a lifetime. "Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live" (55:3).

The Lord reminds his people that just as God made an everlasting covenant with his servant, David, so too will God renew his covenant with them now (55:3). As a result, nations that they did not know will come to Israel, "because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel" (55:5). And Isaiah interjects his own voice in verses 6-7, imploring his people to seek out God with this new opportunity that is before them: "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" (55:6). There was a reason they were in exile - they had forsaken God. Now, the prophet begs of them to not forsake God again, but to "return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them . . . for God will abundantly pardon" (55:7).

This is a very Lenten passage, if you think about it. During this Lenten season, we are called to consider how we are filling ourselves with what is not nourishing, with what is not fulfilling. It's like how The Message interprets the second verse of this passage: "Why do you spend your money on junk food, your hard-earned cash on cotton candy?" We are invited to put those things aside - as the prophet puts it, to stop spending money on that which we do not need. Instead, we are called as God's children to feed on what is true and real for our spiritual journey - God's love which we know in Jesus Christ. We remarked on Tuesday that this reminds us of what Jesus said in the Gospel of John: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). We are promised a new life full of hope, just as Isaiah foretold it to the Israelites. But it is a hope that requires action, response, and faithfulness to fully appreciate God's grace - a total and complete return to the Lord.

I believe another reason Isaiah spoke this word of hope and repentance to the Israelites was due to the situation they found themselves in in Babylon. For more than sixty years, they lived in a foreign culture, and likely had forgotten the practices which were instrumental for their faith. They probably had adopted some habits which were more about their comfort and acquiescing to the dominant culture, rather than acting in ways that were full of integrity as it related to their faith in God. Isaiah not only promised them a

return to their home, but also directed them to reclaim their faith in the midst of these dominant cultural forces.

We live in a world today that many times can feel counter-cultural to our Christian faith. I wonder sometimes if we have become too enculturated and comfortable with all that surrounds us. We schedule ourselves, our children, our families with a multitude of activities, so we don't miss out on any opportunities; but in doing so, we relegate church to the fourth or fifth choice on our calendars. Our lives are so ruled by the clock every day - meetings, appointments, driving, eating, activities - that we rarely take time to be still, to remain quiet, and to listen for God. "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; return to the Lord" - those words are just as needed in 2019 as they were in Isaiah's lifetime.

One thing that the CREDO Conference gave me earlier this month was the opportunity, for a week, to listen more attentively to God's voice without the distractions of our modern culture. I left my cell phone in my room every day as I attended classes and workshops - and I must say, that was particularly freeing. I found that spending such a week detached from TV and constant media and the pressures of daily life allowed me to "return to the Lord" in a more meaningful way. I know that is not realistic for everyone to experience, to be sure. But I would invite you to consider for yourself what one small thing you could do to detach from an unhealthy part of the culture, and in so doing reattach to God's claim on your life.

For me, one of the primary areas where I wish to reclaim my sense of call is in my physical health. I am overweight, I am more than halfway through my active ministry, and I want to be able to be fully present for my family and enjoy retirement, when that time arrives. CREDO gave me the space and tools I needed to claim that, to start taking active steps to address my health, and I have felt more energized and hopeful in these weeks since I have returned.

When Isaiah says, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" I could not help but think of my eating habits. Too often, I would raid the pantry here at church when I got the munchies, or I would devour the salty snacks at home in the evening. And while they may have satisfied a momentary craving, they were not truly satisfying, and certainly were not a way to delight myself in rich food.

And the pressures of the clock and my schedule would often lead to poor choices for eating. Being rushed between appointments meant picking up fast food through the drive thru, or eating a burger and fries in the car. It also meant wolfing down my meals in a scant amount of time, so as to not be behind that ever-present, demanding clock. In rushing through my eating, though, I didn't allow my body to truly be satisfied. I learned at CREDO that it takes twenty minutes from the start of eating until your brain sends signals to your body that you are getting full. Twenty minutes. Sometimes I would eat my lunch in half that time.

For one of our lunches that week, we experienced “mindful eating.” We sat around tables with our food set before us family style. We took note of the colors, the smells, the sound the food made when we placed it on our plates. We ate slowly – it was suggested we chew ten times before we swallowed – and allowed ourselves to fully appreciate the taste in our mouths. We put our forks down between bites, again to intentionally slow ourselves down. And you know what? After eating over the course of twenty minutes, I was full. I didn’t want to have seconds. The meal was taco salad – which I usually would jump at the chance to refill my plate. Mindful eating – perhaps that is a practice you might try to slow down, to be a bit counter-cultural, and to reclaim the good and rich food which God has set before you in your life.

Many times, when we are seeking something to fill our physical, emotional, or spiritual needs, it is because we are empty inside. It could be healthy things which refill our hearts – travel, exercise, conversation with friends. It could be unhealthy things which have taken hold – even control – over our lives: food, drugs, alcohol, destructive behavior. If we are feeding our faith regularly and consistently – like drinking water in the desert even if we don’t feel thirsty – we are less likely to feel the depths of emptiness which seem insurmountable. If we are feeding our faith sporadically or rarely – only coming to the waters when we are severely dehydrated – we are more likely to seek out quick fixes and fills, which ultimately never fully satisfy. That can lead to addiction, to be sure.

One of the things I have been most deeply proud about being the pastor of this congregation is its welcome of people who are seeking to reclaim their lives from the illness of addiction. Every week, we have groups that meet in this space to seek support around the addictions of overeating, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse. There are groups for those who speak English, and there are groups for those who speak Spanish. Every Friday, I see women and men, young and old, black and white and brown – all who come to the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. They are so deeply grateful for us providing them a space to meet. It is their lifeline. It is their hope. It is their means of feeding their faith in their Higher Power that they can fill themselves with rich, delightful food. It is their faithful response to return to God, so they might live into hope and life.

In this Lenten season, how are you called to feed your faith? What practices do you wish to let go of, and which practices do you wish to take hold of? How might God be calling you to quench your thirst in the life-giving waters of God’s love? We have been given the gift of hope and promise of new life. How will we reorient our lives so we might return to the Lord with all our being?

Thanks be to our God, who invites us to the life-giving waters, so we might be replenished, renewed, and revived as God’s children. Amen.