

“COME, LISTEN, LIVE”

ISAIAH 55:1-9; LUKE 13:1-9
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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One of the joys of being a parent of middle school age children with all kinds of different activities is *fundraising*! Music and sports aren't free, after all, and it seems like every week comes with a new request for parents to help out with this or that fundraising effort for this or that activity.

My personal favourite of these is Bingo! Two or three times a year, I get to spend five hours on a Thursday evening working at the Bingo hall!

Usually this involves meandering around selling cards and checking to see if Bingos are correct, but this past Thursday I was the “pay runner.” Basically, this meant that most of my evening was spent sitting on a chair, ready to spring into action to bring the lucky winners their money when “Bingo!” was called.

All things considered, it wasn't a bad gig. People were usually very happy to see me, which was nice. And I got to catch up on some reading in between “bingos!”

I was in a rush on the way out of the house that day, so I just grabbed the top book from a stack beside my chair. It happened to be a book about philosophy—specifically, about cosmology and the nature of the universe.

Does our examination of the cosmos point to a beginning in time or has it existed eternally?

Did the universe just pop into existence or did something or *someone* bring it into existence?

I like philosophy, but by around 8:30 pm, when my head was spinning with terms like “quantum mechanics” and “the curvature of space time” I was wishing I had brought a novel 😊.

A bit later in the evening, a lady sat down beside me and asked what I was reading. I tried to explain it as best I could and, to my surprise, she seemed very interested! “I've always been interested in those kinds of questions,” she said. “Me too,” I replied. A brief but interesting conversation followed.

As I drove home on Thursday, I began to wonder, though. Even if we could prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the universe had a “first cause,” even if we could establish with certainty that God brought the cosmos into existence, what difference would that make?

How would it change things for ordinary human beings like you and me and the people that filed out of the bingo hall into the night?

It would be nice to know, I guess, that there was a powerful being out there who made a bunch of impressive stuff, but the bigger questions would remain unanswered.

Why did God make space and time and an earth full of plants and animals oceans and mountains and human beings?

What is this God *like*? What does this God *want* from and for his creatures? His world? Can this God be *trusted*? Can human beings *know* this God?

After all, as Christians, we do not worship a generic God or a “first cause,” but the God revealed and made known in Jesus Christ. There is an inherent *specificity* to our worship and to our faith.

We worship a God who doesn’t just start a universe and let it run, but who we believe *interacts* with his creation, who seeks relationship with the creatures who bear his image.

Last week Ernie began his sermon with a simple and important question: How is our relationship with God?

This Lenten season, are we growing closer to God? Farther away?

Are we becoming more aligned with his purposes for our lives and for the world or are we wandering down our own paths?

The two texts we have chosen to focus on today give us two different but related ways of getting at these questions.

In **Isaiah 55**, we are given a picture of a feast.

It is an invitation and a promise that harkens all the way back to the promise God made back in Exodus to liberate his people from captivity, to bring them into a good land, flowing with milk and honey.

It is an invitation given to a people in exile, far from home (both literally and symbolically), a people who have wandered away from their God and are suffering for their sins of idolatry and injustice.

To these people, Isaiah holds up a picture of abundance and blessing, of rich food that delights and truly satisfies.

“Seek the Lord while he is near,” Isaiah says! Turn away from the unfruitful paths you have chosen, turn toward the one who has promised life and a future.

Listen. Why do you keep going down dead ends, searching for what does not satisfy? Why can you not see that the bread that I offer will meet your deepest need?

Trust me... There is a future of bounty and peace that awaits you, if you will only return to me.

Our text from Isaiah is a reminder of what God has promised, a reminder of the everlasting covenant of blessing that God made with David, a reminder that Israel was called to be a light to the nations and that one day this calling would be fulfilled.

The big picture here is of God calling his people back to a vision of beauty and plenty and peace.

In **Luke 13** we are given a picture of tragedy, of disaster, of barrenness.

It begins with Jesus responding to ominous reports about pain and suffering.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, there were a group of Jewish pilgrims from Galilee who had made their way to the temple in Jerusalem. At that time, it wasn't uncommon for Jewish revolutionaries to spring up now and then, and these revolutionaries would often offer sacrifices at the temple, perhaps seeking divine blessing for their cause.

We don't really know much about the specific event Jesus was responding to in this passage, but we do know that Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem, was no friend of the Jews, that he regularly flouted their religious sensibilities, sometimes bringing pagan symbols into Israel's temple, and that, most of all, he was desperate to quell any potential riots and unrest.

Were these Galileans about to stir up trouble? Who knows? But whatever the case may be, it seems that Pilate simply commanded Roman troops to slaughter them right in the temple.

The other reference in this passage is to the Tower of Siloam, a region in central Jerusalem. Here, the devastations seems more tragic than malicious—it seems that a building had simply fallen and crushed a number of people.

In both cases we seem to have random, undeserved suffering.

Jesus' response seems rather harsh and lacking compassion. He says, "You're probably wondering what they did to deserve their fate?" But rather than saying what we *expect* him to say—what we've heard him say in *other* situations where attempts were made to link suffering to sin (John 9, for example, where the disciples asked Jesus whose sin was responsible for a man being born blind)—he turns the hypothetical question right back on those present!

They are no more or less guilty than anyone else... AND... unless you repent, you'll share their fate!

What is Jesus talking about here? Is he talking about the final judgment here? Or is he referring to the present and warning that if the people of Israel persist in violent revolutionary tendencies, they will perish (which in fact happened in 70 AD, with the destruction of the temple after a Jewish revolt against Rome)? Both?

Whatever the case may be, Jesus is diverting his hearers attention *away* from abstract speculation about the meaning of this or that event and *toward* the more pressing and personal matter of... *what about you?*

Yes, horrible things happen, Jesus says. Yes, there is suffering and pain and injustice. Yes there are people whose wills seem perpetually bent away from God's purposes and plans for the world. Yes, people continue to refuse the way that leads to peace.

But what about you?

Which way are you going? What is the path *your* life is taking? Are you oriented properly toward God? Are you choosing the things that lead to life and peace or contributing to the things that lead to death?

What about you?

This is followed by a parable. A story about a fig tree in a vineyard, about a gardener looking for fruit.

This would have been a very familiar kind of story for Jesus' listeners.

This kind of "agricultural" metaphor echoes throughout the pages of Scripture.

- The book of Genesis begins in a garden, after all, and a call to cultivate, to subdue, to produce fruit...
- Deuteronomy... promised land, milk and honey, the promise of enjoying “good things you did not provide,” eating and being satisfied (Deut. 6:11)

Then we have this image of a vineyard that recurs throughout the OT and which is explicitly picked up by Jesus on numerous occasions:

- Isaiah 3 – God condemns Israel’s shepherds for ruining his vineyard, his people
- Isaiah 5 – judge between me and my vineyard
- Amos 9:14 – just one example of the return from exile as a return to the vineyard: “and I will bring my people Israel back from exile.” They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant **vineyards** and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit.

And, of course, Jesus makes this even clearer in the gospels. In Matthew 21 and Mark 12 we read the parable of vineyard, where Jesus likens Israel’s leaders to the tenders of a vineyard that bears no fruit and says that the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to a people who *will* tend it properly and produce fruit.

Jesus’ parable in Luke 13 takes place in a vineyard, but its focus is on a solitary fruitless fig tree. This barren fig tree will be given a year, but if it doesn’t start to produce fruit, it will be cut down.

The point—in this parable, and throughout the whole of Scripture—is fruit.

Our text from Luke is yet another call for the people of God to *be* the people of God for the purposes God has called them to.

We’ve reached the “so what?” part of the sermon.

These texts about milk and honey and covenants and temple massacres and dire words about repentance can often seem so strange, so far removed from our lives here in the twenty first century.

But if we stop to reflect, they are perhaps not as strange as they might appear.

We are still people who wander down dead end roads and render worship where it is not due.

We may not suffer exile physically, but just like Israel, we, too, can find ourselves languishing far from what God has intended for us.

And, on a broader scale, our world still convulses with violence and tragedy and we still wonder about the meaning of suffering.

Perhaps most importantly, we are still people who are faced with the urgent question of how we will live and for whom we will live.

At the Lenten lunch on Thursday, there was a sign placed between two soup tables that indicated which soups were available on each side.

Everyone was in a single line until they got to the sign, then they had to choose.

I joked that we would all be faced with an existentially weighty “moment of decision!” Which soup do I want? Which way will I go?

It’s a good illustration for the question presented by our texts today.

Which way will we go?

Will we heed Isaiah’s words to weary exiles? Will we seek the Lord while he may be found? Will we come to the Lord, will we listen, and live?

Will we heed Jesus’ words to the crowds in Palestine who longed for a very different kind of Messiah and who longed to shed the shackles of their Roman occupiers, and repent of our unwillingness to embrace the countercultural and demanding way of peace?

Will we choose to bear fruit?

Or, will we choose the barren path of sin and self—the path that only leads to death?

These are questions that each of us must ask.

And not just once, when we decide to give our lives to Christ—important and necessary as this initial decision is!—but *throughout* our lives.

None of us knows how much time we have, after all. None of us knows how many opportunities we will have to properly orient ourselves.

Both Isaiah and Jesus in Luke’s gospel make it plainly clear, that there is an urgency to the question.

Seek the Lord *while he may be found!*

Stop categorizing and quantifying sin and suffering, and look in your own heart!

Every day, we must choose.

Self... or God?

Pride... or repentance?

A life of craving and chasing after momentary desires that can never satisfy... or a life where God is enough and can be trusted to meet our deepest need?

The God we serve is not the philosopher's God who serves as little more than a solution to an intellectual problem.

We serve a God who created a world out of love, who created you and I out of love, and who created us to bear fruit—and to enjoy life to the full, both now and in the life to come.

So may we choose this God and this life daily. May we be properly oriented:

- toward God as grateful and obedience image bearers
- toward others as servants and friends
- toward creation as responsible stewards

May we be people whose lives bear fruit, for God's sake, for our own sake, and for the sake of the world God loves.

Amen.