

An Invitation to the Thirsty

Isaiah 55:1-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We have arrived at the last Sunday of June, the Sunday before it *feels* like summer really begins, and the last Sunday of our three-week series based on the theme of the upcoming Mennonite Church Canada Gathering in Edmonton.

We've been looking at what it means to declare the good news in our secular "disenchanted" age. This week's theme is "Where Do We Go from Here?"

On Pentecost Sunday, I quoted the secular historian Tom Holland's advice to the church when asked what he would say in response to this precise question:

Churches cannot afford to be a kind of pale [*imitation*] of secular liberal society... They have to emphasize the strangeness, the weirdness, the bizarre quality of what they believe in. Because ultimately [Christianity] is weird, bizarre and strange. **But it's that strangeness that has animated it for two thousand years...** My advice, for what it's worth, would be that churches should be prepared to emphasize the strangeness because that is what I think people will be looking for.¹

Well, in keeping with Tom Holland's advice, I want to begin with a strange story.

I believe that God can and does speak in weird and unpredictable ways, through wild and unusual characters, in ways that aren't necessarily reflected in respectable theology textbooks or carefully crafted denominational statements.

I don't know how you could read the Bible and come to any other conclusion, frankly. There is some wild stuff in there, and certainly no small number of interesting characters!

So, I want to tell you the story of a guy I'll call Jason.

¹ <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/talkingbird/id1381533696?i=1000560084281>

He pulled up to our church in an old white pick-up truck. It was cold outside, and he was wearing a big black jacket and oversized camo hunting pants. He had a worn-out toque pulled down tight over a baseball cap.

His face was weathered and worn. Long strands of blonde hair spilled out underneath his headwear. His grin had plenty of gaps. The smell of stale smoke wafted across the table.

“I need some help with prayer,” he said, his eyes burrowing into mine.

Well. The message he had left to set up the meeting was confusing and rambling and I was unsure what to expect. A request for money or groceries? Help finding counselling or treatment of some kind? I had no idea.

But it’s safe to say I wasn’t expecting a request for advice on prayer. Believe it or not, pastors don’t get asked this much.

“I’d love to try to help,” I replied. Why don’t you tell me a bit of your story?

What followed was quite easily one of the most bizarre stories I had ever heard—and I’ve heard some strange ones over the years.

There were UFOs and alien twins and angelic beings. The Irish mafia made an appearance as well as the special forces of the US Army. There were conspiracy theories and stories of friends who had personally been involved in bringing down the Twin Towers on 9/11 or who owned 55% stake in Apple and were waiting to cash in.

Another friend was apparently the last legitimate king of Ireland. Jason felt he was in danger because he knew that the government was poisoning people with cancer, and they were on to him.

All of this was interspersed with more mundane injustices of girlfriends who didn’t understand him and friends who had betrayed him. He spoke of being bullied as a kid and not finishing school. It all came pouring out, a torrent of conspiracy and suspicion and grievance and wild speculation about religious texts and spiritual secrets.

But in the middle of all this, Jason’s tone changed, and the conversation took a turn.

“I asked God to show himself to me once,” Jason said at one point in our conversation. “I wasn’t sure if I even believed so I asked for a sign. He gave me a premonition, told me something bad was gonna happen.”

Jason stared at me for a few uncomfortable seconds before going on.

“I was in a bad accident and was in a coma for a few days. I came to the throne room of God. There were these white beings and a big blank screen behind, well, you know, the big guy. And God told me he was giving me a second chance. Told me to help people and spread the light. So that’s what I been doing ever since.”

One of Jason’s friends had recently died. The aforementioned last king of Ireland, he said. “Tell me about your friend’s last days,” I said.

“Well,” Jason said, “he didn’t really have anyone at the end, so I took care of him. He was in a wheelchair so I put stuff in his apartment where he could reach it. I was there with him four times a day when he was dying in the hospital. I was with him at the end. Well, almost the end. When he started, you know, the ‘last gurgle of death,’ I had to leave. I can’t watch that stuff.”

I was preaching on the parable of the sheep and the goats that week. *Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me...*

I thought about Jason’s wild stories. I thought about his vision of the throne room of God and his conviction that he had to spread the light and share the good news. And I thought about Jason being there as the last king of Ireland took his last breath.

I thought about words and deeds and the strange gaps that exist between them.

The study resources that were prepared in advance of the upcoming Mennonite Church Gathering also talk about words and deeds. They summarize the challenge of our moment in this way:

Mennonites in our nationwide community of faith have long histories of ministering through service in other communities. Our faith, for decades, has been made known in the world by our acts... like disaster relief, development assistance and peacebuilding efforts in conflict zones.

(Inspired, in no small part, by passages like the parable of the sheep and the goats!)

But the reason for our actions—that we are known and called by Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to engage in God’s mission of reconciling the world to God’s self—is a story we have not always told.

Can we renew our joy in the gospel so that our words and actions are truly good news for us and our neighbours? Can we find a way to be invitational, incarnational and humbly hold in tension opposing perspectives among us, even as we “hold fast to the word of life” (Philippians 2:15-16)? Can we “be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [us] to give the reason for the hope that [we] have,” but do so “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15-16)?

Well, this is I think a fairly accurate description of the challenge of our time.

And yet, I’ll confess that I have misgivings about how these questions are worded, even as I appreciate the motivation behind them.

It sounds almost like agenda items in a business meeting. Can *we* renew... Can *we* find a way... Can *we* hold in tension... Can *we* give an answer...

Mennonites have always been fond of telling one another what we must *do* for Jesus. Our movement was born out of this radical idea that Jesus’ commands were meant to actually be followed not just taken as the background reading for Paul’s theology. Which was and is good.

And yet, Mennonites have a rather dispiriting track record (we’re hardly alone here, I know).

The history of our movement is, in many ways, a history of splintering off into all kinds of little groups, each convinced that they are the ones who are most faithfully doing enough good things for Jesus, whether it’s living simply enough, shunning enough (and the right kinds of) corrupting evil, embracing enough of the dictates of progressive politics, fighting against enough (and the right kinds of) injustice, ratcheting up enough evangelical fervour, etc.

On Friday I came home to a document sticking out of a shoe on my front porch. Abe Janzen, former executive director of MCC Alberta, had left it there. It was a history of the Low German Mennonites in Alberta that he had written and wanted me to have a look at.

It was interesting reading. I learned about migration patterns and politics and church structures and cultural practices and challenges faced.

But at one point, buried in a paragraph about something else, I read, “There are today 146 Mennonite churches spread over the entire province, representing 16 different Mennonite denominations.”

Abe estimates that there are between 55 – 65 000 Mennonites of all descriptions in Alberta. That’s not a huge number. Yet somehow, we have found a way to divide into sixteen different denominations!

We have very often proven very keen to pounce on anyone who isn’t measuring up to our preferred version of the busy kingdom.

And so, I’m not sure the most helpful question for us to be asking right now is some variation of, “What should we get busy on next?”

Our text this morning begins with these words, “Come, all you who are thirsty.”

Maybe a better question—for our Gathering this summer and for our church and for ourselves personally—might be, “Are we thirsty?”

I think the picture I have painted of our secular age over the last few weeks—a picture that I suspect few of us have difficulty recognizing or resonating with—would say that we *are* thirsty, even if we’re not always aware of it, even if we can’t put our finger on all the causes, even if we try to slake this thirst in all kinds of counterproductive ways.

Our disenchanted age in many ways has brought us unprecedented material comforts but it has been spiritually hollowed out. We have solved so many of the “what’s” and the “how’s” that previous periods of human history could scarcely have imagined, but we have forgotten the “why.”

We have more options—in material goods, in entertainment, in career choices, in lifestyles, in identities—than ever before but we have no sense of our greater purpose or our obligations to one another or who or what could ever compel such a thing.

We have more knowledge at our fingertips (literally) than at any point in human history, but wisdom seems rarer and rarer with each passing day.

Our culture is angry, divided, self-righteous, despairing, trivial, and merciless all at the same time.

We spend money on what is not bread and labour on what does not satisfy, to borrow the language of Isaiah.

And again, as I have been stressing for the last few weeks, these aren't all just problems "out there" in the world. These trends affect us in the church as well, to varying degrees.

To return to the story I began with, I didn't tell it because I think Jason is a template for how we should talk about our faith. Not by a long shot. Much of our conversation was a wild and rambling affair that seemed to make little contact with reality.

I told it because of what he said near the end.

"I asked God to show himself to me once. I wasn't sure if I even believed so I asked for a sign... God told me he was giving me a second chance. Told me to help people and spread the light. So that's what I been doing ever since."

When Jason said this, one of the first things I thought was, "When was the last time I asked God to show himself to me? When was the last time I asked for a sign?"

Do I believe God works in this way? Or is God more or less an abstract justification for my theological system or ethical paradigm? These are challenging questions to ask!

Whatever else was going on in Jason's life, he was thirsty. He believed that God was active and alive and involved in his life in personal and powerful ways.

Again, we might not agree with Jason's interpretation of everything. I would certainly have my questions. But Jason's desire to speak about his faith quite clearly proceeded from a deep sense that God had intervened in his life.

There is something worth paying attention to here. Our *doing* as a church—whatever it looks like—must proceed from a thirst for God and for God's ways in the world.

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.

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.

So, again, to return to the Mennonite Church Canada Gathering in Edmonton this summer, and to wrap up this little three sermon series, I hope that we will heed Isaiah’s words to weary exiles.

I hope that we will seek the Lord while he may be found. I hope that we will resist the impulse to reduce our talk of God to *our* politics, *our* agendas, *our* insecurities, *our* visions of the world.

God’s ways are indeed higher and truer than ours. I hope we will remember this.

I hope that we will wrestle honestly with our cultural moment and all the ways in which we spend our money on that which is not bread and which does not satisfy.

I hope we will acknowledge the church’s failings, yes, but also gladly declare that there is hope for our disenchanting, confused, angry, addicted, and despairing age.

I hope we will speak with joy and hope of the banquet God has promised, where there is enough, and where God can be trusted to meet our deepest need.

I want to close with a quote that I recently came across in a book called *The Republic of Grace* by Charles Mathewes, professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia. I may have used it before, but I seem to be losing the capacity to remember what I share where, and it’s a good enough quote to hear more than once.

In many ways, it speaks to my hope for our church, for the Mennonite Church, and for the global church. Here’s what Mathewes says:

I want to wake people up to the challenges they face to their faith, their prayer life, their ability to love, their ability to be grateful, their ability to joyful, their ability to care. Christians need to believe again—to **have real belief in God, but also belief in our capacity to challenge ourselves and change the way we have chosen to live.** We need to turn from cynicism and scorn, from selfishness and avarice [*greed*], from lassitude [*laziness*] and despair, and to affirm that this is our world, and that its suffering and peril are not cause for retreat but urgent reason to recommit to serving God’s purposes in it, that its vulnerability is not inducement to shield ourselves behind brittle walls but reason to care all the more. Behold, today, we have set before us... life and death, and... we must choose to live.²

As we scatter out into the summer, I pray that our thirst for God would be renewed, and that we would seek the Lord while he may be found.

Amen.



² Charles Mathewes, *The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 7.