

Year C, Lent 3, 3/3/13
Hope Central Church
Rev. Laura Ruth Jarrett
Coming Home

Isaiah 55:1-3, 6-12

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.

Seek God while God may be found, call upon God while God is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to God, that God may have mercy on them, and to our God, 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. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. 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.

My smart and beautiful godson Arlo loves Reese's Pieces. He can't quite get enough of them, and so he begs us at the store to buy him some, for he can't quit hold on to his allowance long enough to buy what he really wants - Reese's Pieces, or he wants so many things, and so he buys with his allowance money, little action figures – thousands of them on his desk, a stack of comic books, a roll of police tape he bought once when we were together at Home Depot that says, "Danger," "Do not Cross," and this he draped around his bed. He is a typical kid, not unusual except that he is smarter, more beautiful than any other boy, of course.

But what he wants most consistently is Reese's Pieces. He cannot concentrate on Monday night dinner with us, his doting Godmothers. He cannot concentrate on an entire movie without pausing it, to get some more Reese's Pieces.

Now, it's kind of an identity thing with him. He's the guy who likes Reese's Pieces. So for his 11th birthday last July, I went to stop and shop and bought one of those big tupperware containers whose purpose is to hold cereal, three boxes of cereal, and instead of filling that container with cereal, I filled it with about 15 bags of Reese's Pieces. Man, you should have seen him when he unwrapped that present in front of his friends. His eyes lit up with the wonder of that excess of Reese's Pieces. He was the

envy of his friends, and I was proud to have thought of a gift that would finally fill his need of enough Reese's Pieces.

We are born this way, or formed this way, not knowing what it is we want to fill our hunger, and so when we are young, we experiment, will this fill me, will this keep me satisfied? Will this give me identity? Is there anyway to stock pile a bunch of this so that I will never run out, so that I will never feel compelled to begin to worry that there will never be enough?

When our families, our civic cultures, our religious practices work, as we mature, our longings for being filled mature. We learn discreet and subtle, or very explicit lessons about the spiritual, emotional, and physical ways to fill our needs. If you fill yourself with that much candy, you'll be sick, not feel well, throw up, perhaps. If you hoard cash, stocks, property against the needs of the poor, if you say what is available is only available to me and the people of my class and race, you will relinquish connection to your moral compass and to our common humanity.

Our scripture this today is from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah the prophet was living in a time of relative security in Judea, about 2700 years ago, when there was a rise of the aristocracy among some Jews - who indentured other Jews' labor and property for the sake of their own fortunes. Isaiah's preoccupation recorded in the first 39 chapters of the collection of his prophecy was the unequal and uncaring policies and practices of the rich against the poor - a situation so similar to the rise of the megabanks and merchants for whom in the 1980s, 90s and early 2000s, our US government endangered the poor, the widow and orphan by dismantling the SEC and other regulatory agencies. This enchantment with profit and disregard for the poor, brought about the last recession which included lending to those who could not repay, the rise of CEO salaries so disproportionate to worker salaries as to be sinful, and the payment of dividends to share holders while bankrupting pension funds. In the 80s, 90s, and 2000s it was so easy to apply words from Isaiah, although 2700 years old and from the Iron Age, to our time and our civic culture - writes Isaiah:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?

This was Arlo's little calamity, and mine. There were so many Reese's Pieces in that unbiodegradable tupperware, that he could not eat them all in time, for they went bad in the bottom, turned funny colors, and tasted funny. And he worried that I would be mad at him. Finally he had to throw what once before was beloved but had turned rancid.

We too stock pile, we too buy with money what does not fill us - piles of grocery bags, rubber bands, more TV stations on cable than we could every ever watch, more apple products, heaps of resentments, emotional scabs we continually pick so will recognize ourselves - when what we could do is, and what we will do, as we mature, is fill ourselves with what is good. This is our Lenten work, to let go of excess so that we might find ourselves at home with God..

The second part of the book of Isaiah was compiled some 200 years after the first, a distinctly different book for a different time. Here's what was different – about 150 years after Isaiah's time, the nation of Judea was taken over by Babylon – roughly modern day Iraq, and the aristocrats and educated Jews from Judea, the ones who had amassed their wealth, were exiled to Iraq in three waves – and were there exiled for about 60 years, long enough for the generation of the exiled to die and for the next generation to have assimilated to Babylonian culture - and away from their own.

Their exile was ended when the Persians, roughly modern day Iran, conquered Babylon, Iran captured Iraq – is there nothing new under the sun - and the Persian king Cyrus released whoever wanted, to go back home to Jerusalem. But in Babylon, the assimilated Jews owned property and were not hard put and didn't want to go back to go home, so wooing them back to Jerusalem and to their culture was a hard sell, for Jerusalem was a wasteland and the Jews that had remained were the ones who had been left behind.

How do you get a people to come home – this is the work of the Lenten season. How do you get the people to return to come home to God, to a field beyond striving, amassing, trying to be filled with what doesn't satisfy.

How do you get the people to return home when the home is in shambles, when the keepers of the house of God have been rampaging, been rampaged by pedophile priests, by race baiting pastors, by congregations who care only for the country club, by bad liturgy, appalling theology, by practices of Christianity so empty of encounters with God or conviction of heart that no one hears a call to compassion for themselves much less the poor, that no one is moved to make this life a paradise of peace?

I say this, that we confuse coming home to God with the institution, with the imperfect house of prayer, with the priests, pastors, popes and people who turned us out, allowed us to be hurt, did not take us in, who did not feed and protect, who gave us to eat what did not fill us.

Coming home to God, is another thing, a different experience, not to be confused with the institution. Home turns out not to be a literal place, not a point on a map, but a place in the heart of God which requires no money or stockpiles of Reese's Pieces, but a place that satisfies, a real place which can only be described by poetry:

A place where the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

There is no map to the heart of God, and the only way to know we are getting close to home is to move toward that sound of singing hills and clapping trees.

Some years ago, I played in a women's percussion marching band, all rhythm instruments, J Conlon and I played together. Sometimes we'd play for the walk for hunger, the AIDS walk, the Breast Cancer – 1 in 9 walks. Sometimes we'd march and play, but often we'd stand still and play folks toward us. They would say when they reached us, I heard your music from far away and though I was tired, your music lifted

me. Once for the Breast Cancer 1 in 9 walk, we were at the finish line. We played the walkers toward us, and at the finish line were people who cheered and applauded. This is what I imagine arriving at home in the field beyond right and wrong is like.

And I imagine the journey toward home to be like this – our congregation's work, the angels' work, the saints' work is like those trees and people who line the route of the Boston Marathon, at start of the race, at the Wellesley College campus, on Heartbreak Hill, who cheer and clap, who encourage the runners on.

Three years ago, my nephew ran that race, through those cheering people and clapping trees, all the way into Boston, down Commonwealth Ave. He turned right on Hereford, just before the final turn left onto Boylston St. and the finish line.

As he ran closer to the home of the finish line, he could hear the crowd roar, and it roared especially when he went down with a leg cramp so severe it dropped him to the pavement. But the crowd singled him out among the thousands, the roar increased for him, for him, and the people yelled, "get up, you can do it, get up, you are strong, get up," and he got up from the pavement of Hereford Street, turned left, and saw the finish line, and finished his race, and the trees clapped their hands, and for my nephew, the hills burst into song.

This is your destiny, our destiny as spiritual people – not necessarily a destiny to be the object of applause, but as people, who will always be coming home, who will be the hills that sing and trees that clap their hands for those coming home, who do not fail to feed the poor, tend to prayer, who are always simply longing to head home, leaving behind whatever distracts us – we will be filled in this life and the next, and long for home no more, because we are at rest this Lent, and at home in the heart of God.