

All Who Thirst

Isaiah 5: 1-9

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The first time I ever visited another country was when I went to Guatemala in High School. And I still remember —viscerally— the overwhelming sense of culture shock in being in such an unfamiliar surrounding.

That first day in Guatemala City, a city of nearly 3 million people, and, at least in the neighborhood where we were, about every inch of the sidewalk was covered with vendors.

Packed in a crowd, and on every side, vendors calling out what they have to offer. Coming up to show you things up close, waving and whistling to get your attention.

I remember thinking that the closest thing I had ever felt to that back home was on Landsdowne Street before a Red Sox game.

Have you ever been in an environment like that, a marketplace where as you are walking through people are hawking goods, vying for your attention, calling out what they have on offer that day.

For a lot of us that experience has moved online. Its right there, right along the side of the screen as you scroll, or popping up in your face as you navigate the web.

The reading from Isaiah this morning begins with the signature cry of the market hawker. But it is God calling out.

It is often rendered in English as “Hark!” or “Ho!” but those all make it sound too formal. What the word really means is “Hey!” “Listen up!”

So this morning’s scripture imagines what God would be saying, if God had a little stall on the sidewalk marketplace. If God was calling out to passersby to invite them into the life God is offering.

So imagine here is a woman selling dates and palm oil, and over here is a weaver offering beautiful cloth.

And here is God.

“Hey! Listen! Are you thirsty?”

Come here, you who have no money,
come and buy wine and milk without cost.

Hey! Listen! Why are you spending your money and your time on things that will never satisfy you.

Listen, listen to me, and you will eat what is good.”

So often we imagine God’s voice as this big booming thing coming from the clouds. Or maybe we hear it as the gentlest whisper that we can only find when we are laying silent at the end of the day.

Isaiah gives us a different image here. God is right in the thick of many voices vying for attention in our ordinary lives, making a pitch alongside all the others.

And its a pretty good deal.

It’s free.

This is that thing called grace. That core, and most important teaching of our protestant faith, that God’s love is not something that we earn, God’s forgiveness doesn’t come with hoops to jump through. It is a gift. Freely given. Liberally poured. Again and again. As often as we need it.

What do you need to drink from the deep well of God’s living water. You need to be thirsty.

What do you need to eat at Christ’s table? You need to be hungry.

What do you need to do to be loved by God? Not a thing.

Too many of us grew up thinking that faith and religion was all about earning God’s favor, doing the right things the right way to earn a reward from God.

Despite that fact that John Calvin and Martin Luther started saying this, in 1517, or the fact that the Apostle Paul was saying it in the year 50. Not to mention here that Isaiah is writing it around 500 years before Christ, we still get this idea in our head that it couldn’t possibly be so simple. There must be something that we have to do to earn it, to buy it, to find it.

But what grace means is that God’s love is your inheritance as a child of God. It was waiting for you when you were born.

Your salvation was bought and paid for before you took your first breath.

God’s forgiveness is a renewable resource, and God will never run out of patience and grace for you, or me, or anyone else.

So the task of faith, and the purpose of religion, isn't to figure out how to earn God's love. It is figuring out what you are going to do now that you know just how ferociously God loves you.

That is the question we have here. God loves you. What does that make you want to do? How does that make you want to live? Who else needs to hear this good news?

There are times when I have done a funeral at this church—and other churches—when the sanctuary is about as full as it is on Christmas or Easter, and full of faces I do not know.

And time and time again people come up to me after those services and say something similar.

It starts with a half-apology, “you know I don't go to church much...” Then they will go on to say how this church felt different, more welcoming, less judgmental, warm, friendly, loving...

I confess I have such a swirl of emotions when I hear comments like that.

Of course, there is the overarching feeling that I am grateful they found this time and time place to be a balm to their souls.

There is part of me that is exasperated, because the truth is there are so many churches like ours, where such warmth and love prevails. So many.

There is a part of me that feels angry. Angry about whatever experience they had, or whatever loud voice they heard, that set their expectation that church would be a place of judgement and shame.

And then there is part of me that is sad. Sad because I suspect that no matter what their experience was for that hour, they will likely walk out those doors and never return.

And there is a part of me that is hopeful, because I hear deep beneath their comment a hunger, for that which we cannot buy. A thirst to drink deep from something bigger and beyond us that we might walk this way of life with our souls intact.

And there is a part of me that wants to run out onto the sidewalk, and shout:

“Hey! Listen! Why are you spending your money and your time on things that will never satisfy you. Listen, come, and you will eat what is good.”

There are plenty of people in the world who probably never wander into a church until someone dies. And yet I believe in my heart that each of their hearts, at some level, as each of ours does, thirsts for something that they have not yet quite found.

You know these people too. Your lives are full of them.

Whoever you are thinking of, here is something I know about them. If they are an average modern adult, with average internet and media habits, then between the time they wake up today, and the time they go to sleep, they will be exposed to about 7,000 advertisements.

7,000 times, someone calling for their attention.

“Buy this, its just what you’ve been looking for.”

“Here is the plan that will finally help you lose weight, because you are not good enough the way you are.”

“5 easy steps to financial independence.”

“Refinance now.”

What kind of effect do you think that has on us? How does that shape our self perception? What does it teach us to value in ourselves and others?

What I love about this passage from Isaiah is that God is not up on a mountain or off in a cloud, God’s voice is right there, among all the others, competing for your attention.

God’s grace is another pop-up ad, right there beside all the rest.

Hey! Listen!

Why are you spending your money, and your life, on things that will never satisfy you.

Come, you who have no money, come to me, find abundant life.

Come, you, you are loved and worthy of love the way you are.

Come, You are forgiven for that thing, yes even that one.

Come, because that church that told you that God did not love people like you, was lying.

Come, your salvation is in order, your life is yours, how will you live as one who is loved?

Come, God’s grace is sufficient, and abundant, and it is for you.

This is the good news that we know. And it is not meant to stay locked up here in this building.

It is not meant to be spoken only from this pulpit to reach whoever happens to walk through the door, or turn on the live stream.

You know people who need to hear this. It doesn't have to be about converting anyone, it doesn't even have to be about getting them to come to church. You might tell them that this is where you have found something to satisfy your soul, but it doesn't need to start there.

Just tell them the truth. Tell them the good news. They are enough. They are worthy of love. Indeed they are loved.

And the thought of having a conversation like this with a friend, or someone in your family, might turn your stomach in knots.

But please just remember, that their day is not a blank slate. The world around them is already telling them a story about who they are. And chances are that story is one in which they are not enough, not worthy, not lovable. But they could be for 3 easy payments of \$19.99.

Everyone you love is already hearing that message every day. It's depressing. It's exhausting.

Who is going to tell them the good news?