

“Come to the Waters”

Isaiah 55

Have you ever been *really* thirsty? I mean, so thirsty that all you can think about is getting a drink? And nothing else matters? (I hope not, because that’s not a pleasant experience!) A few years ago, as our son Brian was finishing his (I think) junior year at College, I picked him up out in Western NY and we decided to go backpacking for a few days in the “Black Forest” region of NW PA on the way home.

I borrowed a friend’s water filter for that trip (mine needed a new cartridge, and for some reason I didn’t get around to buying one) which turned out to be unseasonably hot weather for spring. The region we were hiking also was much drier than we expected, with some intermittent springs only in the lowlands. The most available source of water we could find was an occasional beaver pond that we’d come across.

What I didn’t think about was that my friend’s water filter was a ceramic filter – which is fine for filtering out the giardia and other nasty things that tend to be living in back country water sources... but it does not filter out bad taste like my charcoal water purifier does. Normally, that doesn’t matter... but, let me tell you, when you are drinking out of a beaver pond, it surely does!

The water was so foul tasting that (not to get too graphic) it made me nauseous to drink it. So we hiked for two days and I drank ... let’s just say, *much* less than I should have been drinking. (And I kind of gagged down what I did drink... I would have given \$50 for some Crystal Lite Iced Tea mix!)

I can still remember coming out of the backcountry, almost staggering, a raging headache, getting into the car and praying for a ‘general store’ out there in the middle of nowhere. After driving for what seemed like forever... until we found a little old-fashioned corner store... with iced cold Coca-cola in bottles! I don’t think the first one even got to my stomach – it was just absorbed on the way down! I hardly ever drink soda, but that was surely a ‘pause that refreshed’! I was *so* thirsty!

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The Scriptures abound with images of thirst - and water - to describe our *spiritual state*. It tells us that we have an innate thirst for God that is kind of ‘built into’ us. It tells us, too, that we can ignore that thirst if we choose... it tells us that we humans frequently attempt to quench that thirst by substituting *other* things than that which the thirst is meant to drive us to. So there are numerous references in the book of Psalms, such as

**** Psalm 42:2**

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

**** Psalm 107:9**

... he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

From Psalms onto 12 references in Isaiah about thirst and water, culminating in the chapter we’ll read in just a moment. Jesus then, picks up the theme in the New Testament with references to water in Baptism, to his offer of Living Water to the Samaritan woman and some others...

In fact, this continues all the way to Book of **Revelation** at the end of the Bible, where we read in **22:17** an invitation that is very similar to the one in Isaiah 55:

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let those who hear say, “Come!” Let those who are thirsty come; and let all who wish take the free gift of the water of life.

We’re going to be looking over the next four weeks at some Scripture references to Water, and see ways that water is used to illustrate life in the Spirit. But today, we’re starting with one of my all time favorite passages. Isaiah 55...

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. ³ Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. ⁴ See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a ruler and commander of the peoples. ⁵ Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.”

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⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

⁸ “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.¹³ Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD’s renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever.”

The invitation is to find in the waters of God the delight, and the joy that we were meant to have as Children of God.

Have you seen this commercial for Evian water?

** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQcVIIWpwGs>

I don’t think that is *exactly* what Isaiah had in mind. But it does get your attention!

There are a couple of things that we see in Isaiah’s wonderful invitation that are carried through to other, similar, passages. The first, that I want to point out is that what God is offering us is superior to anything that the world can give us.

So, Isaiah asks, “*Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.*”

Why do we run away from the good things that God offers us? Why, especially since nothing else satisfies? But we do... it’s our nature, isn’t it? And I’m not even talking about blatantly *evil* choices we may make, I mean even the very subtle substitution of a *good thing* for something *better*... or, taking a good gift and forgetting the Giver?

It’s a very human trait... from food, to money, to sex – even friends and *family* ... we take *gifts* of God and make them our gods. *We* become the focus, we are trying to build life

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satisfaction with things that ultimately can never satisfy. Because they were never meant to do that.

But God offers us ‘what is good’... it is the ‘richest’ of fare. In the midst of God’s presence, those other gifts become – surprisingly – *more* precious, more wonderful, more alive, than when we were hoarding and grasping.

Another point that Isaiah presses in his invitation is found right at the beginning. And it seems to be a huge stumbling block to many! What God is offering us ... its **free**. We typically don’t believe in anything free. I have an iPad and an iPhone... and I like to play some games, when I just want to do something mindless. But, I’m also cheap. So I don’t like apps that cost money. But I can hardly find any that don’t entice you with “FREE!” but you find that you only have a sampling of that game... and if you really want to play, you need to pay! And we think... hey, that’s life!

I heard of an experience that a Pastor named Marjorie Mitchell had one Christmas in her church.

She wanted to illustrate the availability of God's gift of salvation. So holding up a poinsettia she said, "Whoever wants this beautiful Christmas poinsettia may have it. All you have to do is take it."

These are her words...

They stared at me. I waited. And waited.

Finally a mother timidly raised her hand and said, "I'll take it."

"Great! It's yours." That's what I wanted. Quick and easy, and on with the application of my sermon. But to my astonishment, she nudged her son, "Go get it for me."

"No," I said. "Whoever wants this gift must come and get it personally. You can't send a substitute."

She shook her head, not willing to risk embarrassment. I waited again. It was a gorgeous flower, unusually large, wrapped in red cellophane with a gold satin ribbon. It was set in front of the pulpit to brighten our small sanctuary during the holiday season. Several people had commented on how beautiful the plant was. Now it was free for the taking. Someone snickered, "What's the catch?"

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"No catch," I replied. "It's free!" No one moved.

A college student asked, "Is it glued to the altar?" Everyone laughed.

"It is not glued to the altar. Nor are there any strings attached. It's yours for the taking."

"Well," asked a pretty teenager, "can I take it after the service?"

I shook my head, though I was tempted to give in. "You must come and get it now." Today is the day of salvation, I thought as I marveled at the power of passive resistance.

I was beginning to wish I'd never started the whole thing, when a woman I'd never seen before stood up in the back. Quickly, as if she were afraid she'd change her mind, she strode to the altar and picked up the plant. "I'll take it," she said.

As she returned to her seat carrying the free gift, I launched with enthusiasm into my text, (Romans 6:23). "The gift of God is eternal life. Believe. Receive. It's free!"

When the service had ended and most of the people had gone home, the woman who claimed the poinsettia came to the platform, where I was picking up my Bible to leave.

"Here!" She held out her hand. "This flower is too pretty to just take home for free. I couldn't do that with a clear conscience." I looked down at the crumpled paper she stuffed into my hand. It was a ten dollar bill.¹

It's hard to wrap our minds around 'free'. Even when we're convinced – in our minds – that God's gift of grace is free, we always seem to want to add an 'if you just ____', or 'but first, you need to ____', or something like that. In the church we need to be on guard lest we confuse our response to God's love with God's love itself. We are loved, not because of what we've done (or will ever do) to deserve that love. We are loved because it is God's nature to love. It's not about us, it's all about God.

That love often – and rightly – will cause a change in our behavior, our attitudes, the priorities in our lives. When we understand the joy of this gift that is given us; when we see that this is what we were made *for*, the response is typically that we want *more!* We want to experience more of God, more of *life* itself, which, we now realize is only found in the presence of God in us.

Isaiah writes, speaking for God himself: "Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may *live*."

We so limit the Good News when we only understand that invitation as a reference to the

¹ *Marjorie Kitchell, Leadership, Vol. 11, no. 2.*

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future – to ‘someday’. But I think that like Jesus’ invitation to ‘eternal life’, to ‘abundant life’ (which are very close to the same thing!) Isaiah is also inviting us here to experience life *now* to the fullest. Why spend money on what is not bread? Why work so hard for things that ultimately never will, and never can satisfy? “Listen that you may live...”

Isaiah continues: “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”

You know, this does not mean, “So, lets all clean up our acts so that we can be acceptable to God!” Or, “Let’s get it together so that we look good to God, and maybe he’ll give us something in return!” No, this is saying, “Let’s let go of everything and anything that is keeping us from falling on God’s Grace... because when we do, we will find that he is waiting for us, and always has been!”

A guy named Matt Woodley wrote this in a blog not long ago:

“A little while ago I wandered into the wrong hospital room at Stony Brook University Hospital (New York). A middle-aged man with only a few teeth and a wide smile told me that he had shattered his foot after falling off a ladder. When I asked him where he lived, he told me the following story:

I used to live in a tent deep in the woods near Selden. Then some vigilantes came and burnt my little tent to the ground. I used to own a bicycle, until a lady in her huge SUV ran into my bike, dragging me and my bike for over a hundred feet. She never apologized or offered to buy a new bike. Actually, while we waited for the police to come, she chatted on her cell phone. I guess I was just a worthless homeless guy in rags. So that's my life so far. I guess after I get out of here, I'll get back to the woods. But, you know, everything will be all right. I have faith in the Lord, buddy.

He told me these stories without bitterness or anxiety. My new friend owns almost nothing, and yet he seems so happy. I'm the guy with the cars and the home and the master's degree,

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but he has more contentment than I do. Why? I'll have to ponder that question a little more, but maybe he has trust and simplicity of heart, and I don't. Maybe Jesus was right after all: our achievements and our stuff and our money can't buy happiness. From birth to death it's all a ludicrous, radical, unmerited gift.

Some day I'd like to have as much trust and simplicity of heart as my homeless friend.²

However much we are able to receive, however much we are able to respond... God is here. Right now... offering us love, compassion, wisdom... direction. He loves me. He loves you.

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost!”

Come!

² Matt Woodley, "The Happy Homeless Man," from his blog "With Us" (8-18-09)