

### **“He Will Abundantly Pardon” – Isa 55:1-9**

“Ho!” It doesn’t have quite the same impact here at Central as it had in an event etched forever in my mind. That event was a Youth Triennium, a gathering of Presbyterian youth in the U.S. once every three years, held in the late Summer. I was a volunteer leader one year – 1992 to be exact, at Purdue University – which meant providing Bible Studies and Reflection Groups for a group of attendees. It was quite an exciting and challenging time, and I had the opportunity to meet a lot of great people both young and old.

But it was a worship service, or to be more precise the beginning of a worship service that is for me unforgettable. Much of the rest of the service, and sadly even the name of the preacher, is lost to my memory, but that opening was unforgettable. In an auditorium at Purdue where some five thousand young people had gathered, along with leaders, he walked out on stage, paused for a moment, and spoke the single word, “Ho!” Then silence – until the entire auditorium erupted with laughter – which was of course the reaction he was seeking. To the young people gathered there, the word “Ho” was indeed a greeting, but not particularly a biblical one, instead being used either to denigrate their female peers or to refer to a certain type of working girl. Once that huge room had settled down, and he had their full attention, he went on to preach what I recall in summary as an effective sermon. But I can never read this text without my mind immediately going back to that moment.

However, having gotten that opening out of the way, let’s follow his lead and take a more sober look at what the text from Isaiah is offering us. One key reason for doing so is that the Book of Isaiah is a profoundly foundational piece of scripture for the Christian faith. Not only is it a vitally important piece of the Hebrew Scriptures we receive as the Old Testament, it seems to have heavily influenced both Jesus and the writers of the New Testament. You may recall a few weeks ago we looked at the incident with Jesus in the synagogue reading a text and declaring “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” ... the passage that he read was from Isaiah – 61:1-2 to be precise. And so we should dig a little deeper into today’s reading from Isaiah.

The reading consists of two parts that are similar in both form and content, and reflect in a way the entire book. In the first five verses God addresses the whole people of Israel with calls that reflect both an invitation to a banquet and the loud calls of street vendors. Tangled in and behind those welcome calls, however, lies a condition that called for the prophet to bring God’s words to the people. We hear a subtle charge that the people are living neither wisely nor well; not living in ways that would reflect thankfulness for their deliverance out of Babylonian captivity back into their Israeli homeland. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?” tells us that the people are making poor choices; “and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” reinforces that challenge. Of course the questions are somewhat rhetorical, and were meant to be taken more broadly. The issue is not bread in and of itself; the issue is that peoples’ priorities were messed up and they were wasting their resources.

But that challenge is quickly followed with an invitation, a beckoning to respond to God and to discover in return a more wholesome and fulfilling life. God supports that invitation with a reminder of what he has already delivered in the covenant with David, a covenant that has been once again fulfilled to the Israelite nation through their deliverance and return from exile by the rivers of Babylon. He expands that covenant here to all nations, with Israel as the prototype and agency through which the other nations will also find and acquire meaningful life.

The second part is similar to the first, and moves the people past the first response to what God has done for them into an ongoing seeking favour from God, with a promise that in doing so God will continue to abundantly pardon them.

In the transition from the first part to the second part in this reading we can see a powerful shift in the relationship between God and faithful believers. While referencing the covenant made between God and David, here we observe a shift from hearing God declare “if you do such and such I will bless you as a nation” to now saying “I have blessed you and will continue to bless you, and this is what I expect in return.” This is a dramatic and powerful shift from the early Old Testament theology – which most people today still hold as being the whole story! – of “curses and blessings”, or “do right and I’ll bless you; do wrong and I’ll curse you.” The shift moves to a more Christian theology of “God has done this for you, and this is an appropriate response in your new life.”

In a crucial way the Book of Isaiah as a whole reflects this major shift in peoples’ understanding of the relationship between God and people. The book itself has long been a focus of biblical scholarship. Central to that study in the past few hundred years has been the recognition that there are two – many would argue three – major parts to the book. The first thirty-nine chapters are apparently from a prophet who lived in the Eighth Century B.C., a classic prophet of the era who castigated the leaders and people of Israel alike for their unfaithfulness, scheming, and injustice and both predicted and promised that God would wreak vengeance upon them for their lack of faith and obedience. The second block which extends to the end of Chapter 55 apparently comes from the hand of a writer who lived in Israel following the return of the exiles from Babylon some 170 years later. It begins with the unforgettable “Comfort, comfort ye my people” and carries on through our reading today. The third section contains what is called the “Suffering Servant” passages, one of which Jesus quoted in the synagogue.

Many have suggested that the sections could or even should be separated, but a fascinating new perspective was offered by Brevard Childs, a professor at Yale Divinity School, who suggests that the book not only has been properly kept intact by both Jewish and Christian scriptures but was deliberately stitched together to provide a historical perspective on the shift in understanding of the relationship between God and people. Specifically, to preserve the shift in perspective from a harsh and demanding God to a God of grace, mercy, and pardoning. His analysis is fascinating and compelling, but there’s no way we can go into it all here – if you’d like to know more come talk to me or perhaps we could do a bible study on it.

In any event, the key is to understand that there has been a dramatic shift in how people have viewed God and what they understand God wants from people. The Book of Isaiah as a whole reflects the shift, as does our reading today. More importantly for us as Christians we see Jesus as having truly fulfilled the reading he selected from the same book. We profess our faith in Jesus as being the ultimate reaching out by God to provide a path for forgiveness and reconciliation. How then do we see the second half of this new paradigm, the part about what it is that God expects or at least wants from us?

Can we say that people today still spend money on things other than bread; i.e. that people tend to be wasteful with their resources? What trinkets and short-term satisfaction do we spend our time and money on? How can we incline our ears, and listen, that we might not only live but have the abundant life promised to us by God in Christ? Yes, these are rhetorical questions, and we do know the answers. We can listen to the word of God in worship and scripture; we can wait the direction from God in prayer – at least we do when we’re not too busy in prayer telling God what we think He should do. We can accept that we are not only pardoned

by God but that we are lovingly accepted, and use that new-found strength and vigour to live in wholesome ways that will cause others to seek the joy and fulfillment that we have found. We can use the energy we gain from no longer fretting about what is unimportant to then concentrate on how we can address the things in life that really matter, our relationship with God and our relationship with other people. This is the freeing up that we are promised in the abundant new life offered by God in Christ, the living proof of the claim in Isaiah that “he will abundantly pardon.”