

Isaiah 55 All of you who are thirsty, come to the water!

Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat!

Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!

² Why spend money for what isn't food,
and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy?

Listen carefully to me and eat what is good;
enjoy the richest of feasts.

³ Listen and come to me;
listen, and you will live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful loyalty to David.

⁴ Look, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a prince and commander of peoples.

⁵ Look, you will call a nation you don't know,
a nation you don't know will run to you
because of the LORD your God,
the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you.

⁶ Seek the LORD when he can still be found;
call him while he is yet near.

⁷ Let the wicked abandon their ways
and the sinful their schemes.

Let them return to the LORD so that he may have mercy on them,
to our God, because he is generous with forgiveness.

⁸ My plans aren't your plans,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

⁹ Just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my plans than your plans.

Psalms 63 God! My God! It's you—

I search for you!

My whole being^[a] thirsts for you!

My body desires you
in a dry and tired land,
no water anywhere.

² Yes, I've seen you in the sanctuary;
I've seen your power and glory.

³ My lips praise you
because your faithful love
is better than life itself!

⁴ So I will bless you as long as I'm alive;
I will lift up my hands in your name.

⁵ I'm fully satisfied—
as with a rich dinner.

My mouth speaks praise with joy on my lips—

⁶ whenever I ponder you on my bed,
whenever I meditate on you
in the middle of the night—

⁷ because you've been a help to me and I shout for joy in the protection of your wings.

⁸ My whole being clings to you;
your strong hand upholds me.

Luke 13 Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. ² He replied, "Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did. ⁴ What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did."

⁶ Jesus told this parable: "A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ He said to his gardener, 'Look, I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I've never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil's nutrients?' ⁸ The gardener responded, 'Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. ⁹ Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.'"

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Let me ask you a few questions. Can this withered fig tree that Jesus encounters bear fruit? What do you think? Or can the kind of poverty Isaiah speaks of really produce abundance? Thoughts? Or can fasting lead to feasting? We might say no, over and over again, to such questions. Yet, Scripture today confronts us with some very different answers. They seem to say yes, and yes, and yes. Fortunately, we Lutherans are used to dealing with dichotomies. And if these dichotomies weren't enough to challenge us, we find ourselves in the midst of another tension, another famously Lutheran dichotomy of faith today. Here, just over two weeks in to the season of Lent, I'm already ready to wish you a very Happy Easter.

Seriously, Happy Easter! I can already hear the questions, and no, the isn't pastor off his rocker, y'all. Well, I am a bit loopy, but not about this. You see, we always say there's 40 days in Lent, but if you do the math between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, there are actually 46 days. Why is that? Because for nearly two thousand years, every Sunday, whether in the middle of Lent or on a humid July Day or in the midst of a January blizzard, every Sunday of the year has been considered a little Easter. So, in a very real sense, every Sunday is a happy Easter indeed.

You see, the earliest Christians saw in Sunday a special significance. Sundays held a unique place because it was on this day that Christ rose from the dead. Every Sunday of every week we're reminded that God blessed this day, the first day of the week, with a new work, a new sign of the promise: that not even death could separate us from the

love and life of God. With the sunrise on a Sunday long ago, the Son of God passed from death into life.

So, no matter when Sundays occur, they're little signs of Easter, small tastes of the great resurrection feast. That's why, traditionally, Lenten fasts skip Sundays. We're not meant to fast at wedding banquets. Festivals aren't meant for self denial, but for the reception of God's active, sensory, kinetic grace. In other words, we're not called to fast all the time. Sometimes, we're meant to feast, and every Sunday is a day meant to feast, to party, to celebrate the work of God amongst us. That's one of the beauties of a fast. Done rightly, this temporary state teaches us how to feast, full of thankfulness and appreciation for the good things that we receive from the hands of God.

In a connected way, we're not all necessarily called to the same fast. Fasting from chocolate wouldn't be hard for some, and would be excruciating for others. The same goes

for caffeine, for technology, for recreational shopping (and let's be honest – most of our shopping is recreational), and a slew of other things. We can't expect the fast we need to be the fast that everyone else needs as well.

One of my professors at Duke Divinity put it this way. Someone with an eating disorder isn't called to fast from food. They're called to a healing and wholeness that includes learning to love cheeseburgers and their own body. In the words of Isaiah, **Eat what is good! Enjoy the richest feasts!** We can see this truth in other ways as well. Those who've lived a lifetime of poverty aren't called to fast from spending. Instead, Isaiah again cries, **whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat! Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!** Those who thirst in this life for clean water aren't called to continue on parched or poisoned. Isaiah once more declares, **Let all who thirst come to the water,** fresh and fit to drink. Their fast is not from the things that

they've been deprived from their entire lives, but from other things that stand as obstacles to the experience of God. Fasting can teach us this, that we're not all called to the same fast.

And though we're not all called to the same fast, we also learn that we're surely called to the same feast. Fasting teaches us that the feast is not just meant for us, but for others. Often we look at passages like Isaiah as simply spiritual truth. And don't get me wrong, there's deep spiritual thirsting in our society. There's powerful spiritual hunger across the globe. The profound spiritual poverty at work throughout the world. In each of these situations, we as Christians and the church as a whole is called to be active in addressing these deprivations. But this doesn't mean that Isaiah's only meaning is spiritual, or that was even his original intent.

We must remember that the prophets primary concern wasn't to predict future. Prophets concern began with injustice in the present and connected that with God's promise in the future, and told people that future depended upon a restoration of God's justice now. Here. In this world. Isaiah's first thought was that there are people hungry and thirsty and poor right now despite the massive wealth of Israel. When the Lord speaks through Isaiah and declares that, "my ways are not your ways," that means that God's Kingdom refuses to prefer personal wealth over systemic poverty. Our ways continue to foster a world of have's and have not's, where wealth accumulates at the very top and the only thing that trickles down is desperation.

But the prophets, and Isaiah here chief amongst them, refuse to be satisfied with this disconnect between God's ways and our ways. They point to the covenant promise of God that calls us to faithfulness, that empowers God's

people to seek and know God's ways. "Seek the Lord where God may be found...Return to the Lord so God may have mercy." How we live in the present is deeply connected to how we will live in the future. Seeking the Lord isn't just about a prayerful seeking, though we certainly need that, but an activated living toward God. The communion feast that God offers on every little Easter, the very presence of God, is not just a sign of a future feast in a heavenly realm. It's a catalyst for the transformation of this world, where the feast of communion might spill over into feeding people who hunger and thirst on every day of the week, where the abundance of bread and wine might spill over and become gifts of tangible grace to those in our community that face poverty.

You might have noticed that the Lord's prayer makes this connection for us. We pray it every week, and hidden in plain sight is this reminder that how we experience others

will shape how we experience God. “Forgive us our sins **AS** we forgive those who sin against us.” These words, right from the mouth of Jesus, put our prayer before God in a way that tells us that our relationships with others necessarily affects our relationship with God, and vice versa. We pray that there's a relationship between our reception of God's forgiveness and our offering of forgiveness of others. God will forgive our sins, we know that to be true. But will we forgive with the same measure? We will be so shaped by the forgiveness of God that we will become forgiving people?

Part of the gift of fasting is that it creates within us a preparation for the feast of heaven, meant not only for ourselves but for all creation. Fasting helps us to prepare for fruitfulness. Fasting helps to shape our faithfulness, to change our hearts, that we might have compassion on those who don't choose to go without good things, but are

forced to go without those good things that we take for granted. Jesus tells his listeners that only a change of heart leads to abundant life, that the fig tree must bear fruit in order to fulfill its intended role in the kingdom. For us, fasting intends to change our hearts for that abundant life. Fasting intends to make us barren fig trees fruitful again with the love of God, with the grace of Christ, with the vibrancy of the Holy Spirit. This means rearranging our lives, that through our fasting, we might find ways for us all to feast together.

And that begins with compassion. When we fast from food, we're not called to personal suffering. Instead, in our hunger or in the absence of something we're used to having immediately accessible, we're called to consider those who go home hungry not by choice, but because there wasn't enough money for both a heat bill and a trip to Kroger. We're called to consider those whose thirst isn't an option but instead a necessity because there's no safe

source of water. We're called to remember that for some, there's no such thing as expendable income. Fasting prepares us for feasting, but never feasting alone.

Perhaps the difference between sin and feasting is the presence of community, the company of friends. If we eat all the food we want at the expense of others, then that's gluttony. But if we eat all we want and share with those who need it, then that's a festival. If we use all we want and refuse to share, then that's greed, but if we share widely the things that we're given to use, then that's a party. That's a reflection of God's kingdom where all who thirst drink deep of fresh water, where all who hunger find fullness of wondrous things, where poverty doesn't prevent someone from experiencing God's blessing of abundance.

That's the beauty of these little Easters in Lent. As we learn to fast in our own lives, we also learn the joy of feasting with one another, of sharing what we have so that

everyone might know the joy of being filled by the God of the Universe. We learn what we can do without so others don't have to do without. We learn that our Lent doesn't just end with the Easter sunrise, but is punctuated with resurrection every single day, and especially on Sundays. Here's the thing: bearing fruit isn't optional for the fig tree. Equal justice isn't optional for the prophets. And Easter isn't optional for the Christian life. We're meant to live in a resurrection world, where all find find spiritual resurrection and abundant life in the world right now. In our Lenten fasts, we're meant to learn that feasting with Jesus and our neighbors is the kind of Easter life we're meant to live. Amen.