

## Isaiah 55 –

There are so many beautiful images in this passage. The first image is full of sights, sounds, smells.

Imagine a busy middle eastern market. Anyone traveled to the Middle East and been to a Middle Eastern market? I haven't either so we'll have to go with what we've probably seen in videos and films.

Imagine the scents and tastes...the exotic spices, the fresh fruit and bread, probably a few not so pleasant scents given the state of sanitation in those days.

Imagine the sounds...the buzz of the crowd as they worked their way through the market, the sounds of coins jingling as payment is made.

Over the din of the shoppers comes the call of the vendors...come buy my lamb...fresh baked bread here...come...come see the choicest olives and dates.

You work your way through the market. You've had a tough time. Money is scarce, your crops didn't do well, and the Empire keeps taking more than you have to give. Your cupboards are bare. You pass by all the stalls with the best food.

Instead, you go down the lane where the meat is gristly...the fruits and vegetables are small and have brown spots...the bread is baked with little or no yeast and with grainy barley flour. Even there you struggle to find enough to feed your family for a few more days, when you will be paid again.

Suddenly, you hear another vendor's voice, calling above the din! Ho you that thirst. Come you that are hungry! Don't settle for scraps. My bread and my milk and wine will truly satisfy you. Come, eat the rich food.

You assume you can't afford it, but you're drawn to the voice anyway. Excited voices get louder as you get closer. You hear the vendor, you who have no money, come. Eat!

Unbelievably, it's all free! You don't have to pay a penny. And it seems like it never runs out! You can't believe it. Shakily, you accept the rich food with delight. You bite hungrily into the bread and fresh fruit. You run home and share with your family.

Now, let's look at that last image in the passage. This is an image of a joyful homecoming. We are nearing the end of the exile. Chapter 55 of Isaiah is the last chapter of what some

scholars call second Isaiah. After this begins the prophecies to the post-exile people of Judah.

So imagine a throng of people pouring out of the city of Babylon. They're carrying their belongings and holding their children's hands. People are cheering and singing. Shouts of joy go up.

And it's not just the human creation that's so joyful. The very mountains are singing. The trees are singing and clapping.

What once looked desolate and dead now comes to life with cypress and myrtle. In peace you reenter the City of Jerusalem, ready to start over.

In between these two vivid images, we are told what lies behind these scenes of joy.

The people living in exile have struggled to find hope. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, all their prophets have repeated words of hope and reassurance. It was something to hold on to.

But it's been a long time. At this point, nearly 70 years into exile, many of the original exiles have died. Some of the people now hearing Isaiah's words aren't even the ones who played a role in the things that led to the exile.

Some of them may not have a particularly good idea how the actions of Judah itself led to their downfall.

Some are even starting to take on more of the Babylonian ways and even the Babylonian gods. After all, it doesn't look like their own God is able to do much for them.

But God has not abandoned them. God was not defeated by the Babylonian gods. And now God wants them back. God is ready to pardon. Isaiah says seek the Lord. Call on God. Repent and turn back to God.

People may be harsh and endlessly punishing. But God's way is not the human way. God will have mercy, God will abundantly pardon, and God will bring them back home.

Then comes the promise...as the rain and snow water the earth, so God's word will go out. And just as the rains from the skies bring forth life, God's word will accomplish what God intends.

And what God intends for the people of Judah is freedom...homecoming. Like rain makes the earth burst with life, God's word brings abundant life...God brings new life to a people who felt like Ezekiel's dead, dry bones in the desert.

But this homecoming...this salvation...goes far beyond Judah's return from exile.

God promises that nations Judah doesn't even know will one day stream to the holiness of God's chosen people.

God's purpose for the people of Israel has not changed from the very first promise given to Abraham so long ago. That they will be blessed in their own land so that through them, God may bless the whole world.

In its time, this passage is the joyful reversal of the exile. But the image of the joyful return and the trees and mountains responding with joy reaches way back into the mists of time. It's no less than a reversal of the expulsion from Eden. It's the renewal of all creation...it's recreation.

It stretches way back to the beginning of time, but it also extends far forward into the end of the age. It looks with hopeful anticipation to the water of the river of life, flowing through the New Jerusalem.

God's word will accomplish God's purpose. God speaks...a new king rises up, Cyrus of Persia. At God's word, King Cyrus ends the exile and lets the people return to rebuild and start anew.

This image of what God does points us towards next week's reading. Next week we'll hear this...in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

Jesus is the Word. And that Word will accomplish God's purpose...the salvation of the world. That word will be not just the renewal of God's covenant with Israel. Jesus will be the new covenant who will bring all nations streaming to the God of Israel.

And best of all – the best food and wine...the rich meats and beautiful, sweet fruit, fresh bread...it's all free.

The Word made flesh invites us all to the heavenly banquet.

In exile, the people of Judah were at risk of forgetting their God. It seemed their God had been defeated by the Babylonian gods. Come, the Babylonians said. Forget your God. Our gods will be your gods.

But the vendor who drew you in says, Come...drink the water of life. Don't waste your time on gods who can't nourish you. Don't give your allegiance to gods who can't save. Come, eat and drink the rich food and drink of the heavenly banquet.

The words spoken by Isaiah to the exiles, are the same words we hear in our own exiles. They are words that call us not to look for life in the places it cannot be found. We are called to seek the Lord, to call on God, to turn to God, no matter how far away God seems to be nor how little we understand of God's way.

Through the waters of birth we are born into a world both beautiful and broken. In baptism, we pass through the waters of death to the waters of new life. Daily, in prayer and meditation, we drink from the waters that truly quench our thirst for more love, more freedom, more life.

In so many ways, God leads us forth into new life. And there, we join our neighbors...we join the earth, bursting with life...we join the mountains and the trees as all creation sings for joy.