

This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for the third Sunday of Lent, March twenty-four, in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen. It is based on the following Scriptures:

Isaiah 55:1-9

55:1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

55:2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

55:3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

55:4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

55:5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

55:6 Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

55:7 let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

55:8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

55:9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Psalms 63:1-8

63:1 O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

63:2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

63:3 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

63:4 So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

63:5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

63:6 when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

63:7 for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

63:8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

10:1 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,

10:2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,

10:3 and all ate the same spiritual food,

10:4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

10:5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

10:6 Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.

10:7 Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play."

10:8 We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.

10:9 We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.

10:10 And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

10:11 These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.

10:12 So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

10:13 No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Luke 13:1-9

13:1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

13:2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

13:3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

13:4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?"

13:5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

13:6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

13:7 So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'

13:8 He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

13:9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Our Bible stories for today begin in a place of hunger and thirst; violence and despair.

In the Gospel, Roman Governor Pilate used humans as sacrifices to his gods.

In Isaiah the story is set near the end of the Exile where the Jews remained in Babylon, perhaps they had come to assume they would never return to Jerusalem.

Both the Roman empire and the Babylonian empire created cultures for the poor that were like dry and thirsty lands where there is no water;

no renewal;

no imagination;

places where all that was will be

and nothing new will happen under the burning power of the elite.

But wait! A new and unexpected voice comes in the midst of a common day.

And not just unexpected, but engaged.

In the Gospel the gardener steps in and says there is still hope for this barren tree.

And from the prophets we here

“Hey! Over here! Come over here!”

The scene is reminiscent of the Wood County Fair.

A family strolling the midway with children begging for one more game and then one more ride and then one more trinket.

Everyone is tired and on edge

and nothing quite meets the expectations of the children who seem to have an insatiable appetite for stuff and more stuff.

The pocket book is out of cash

and the throats are dry

and there is no money remaining,

not even the smallest snow cone.

Then a voice comes:

Hey! Water Here! Clear, refreshing water!

Get your water! It's free! Really!

No strings attached!

Just ice cold water!

Plenty for the whole family!

YHWH cries out

“Come to me! Listen! So that you may live.”

Come! Listen! See! Call! Seek!

You toil and are glutted and yet remain thirsty.

“Come to me! Listen! So that you may live.”

You buzz around 24/7 and yet remain unfulfilled.

“Come to me! Listen! So that you may live.”

You party and party some more, but have no joy.

“Come to me! Listen! So that you may live.”

I'm cutting a covenant with you. The foundation of it is my steadfast love.

Here YHWH reminds the people of God's covenant with David.

Now I think this may be heard in two ways:

One is to see this covenant through the glory days of Israel.

The days of David as King of Israel were considered by some as the best of all years.

Whether or not they really were, is beside the point.

It is a little like Mary Hopkin singing the Russian folk tune “Those were the days my friend we thought they’d never end”.

The point was that the Kingdom of Israel was young and energetic and undivided.

It was a time of blessing when YHWH was present and active and hope was alive, literally dancing in the streets.

Yet another way to see this reference to David is God’s steadfast love for David in the midst of all his sins, all his self-absorption,

all his greed and abuse and murderous heart.

God did not give up on David and God will not give up on you or me.

God’s everlasting covenant is steadfast and sure.

Call. Seek. Turn. YHWH cries out “Return to me”.

Return to me and you will find mercy and abundant pardon.

Our culture, our neighborhoods, our schools, our hearts, our minds are full of judgment.

Like the land owner in the Gospel we are quite sure that the trees of our lives are barren, useless and will never bear any fruit.

Like dry desert with no waterfall, we crackle beneath the weight of our sin.

But then along comes a gardener ready to tend to us.

Along comes the shadow of a full and rain-filled cloud.

One drop and then two and three and three million begin pelting the earth and what was dead comes alive and what was barren gets buds and flowers and fruit exceedingly, abundantly, above all we can ask or imagine!

The plan is to make you into a beautiful community of faith; a community of faith that calls out to others.

Come! See! And they actually come!

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the land*

making it bring forth and sprout,

giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

so shall my word be that goes out

from my mouth;

it shall not return to me empty,

but it shall accomplish that which I delight in

and advance in the thing for which I sent it.

Perhaps it is easy for you to see the thorns in your own soul.

Perhaps you view the life of your neighbor like a briar patch.

Perhaps your marriage is dried up or your workplace like barren tree.

Perhaps your children have gone down the same snake hole that King David slid into.

Perhaps you have assessed your life and decided it might as well be cut down.

But YHWH says my ways are not your ways and those thoughts that you have are *not* my thoughts.

Like a mother who will not stop loving her child, God’s remains steadfastly devoted to you.

Like a gardener that is alert and attentive, God believes in you.

Like a chef who rises early to prepare a feast, God is setting a table before you with glad anticipation.

The flowering myrtle will rise from your soul.

The evergreen cypress will ascend and bring a mighty shadow of love to your family and your neighbor.

God has no interest in cutting you off or cutting you down.

But rather through the love of Jesus Christ God came to tend to your roots and strengthen your soil.
In the shadow of God's wings you will find shelter from the burning sun;
in the shower of God's love you will thrive in delightful joy.

Instead of the thorn shall ascend the cypress;
instead of the brier shall climb the myrtle;
and *you* shall be to
the Lord a name to remember,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Now may our God of everlasting life
Water your soul with refreshing grace
Tend to your family with cultivating kindness
And Spring up in your neighborhood with
Justice, wisdom, laughter and peace
Now and forevermore
Amen