



“Welcome To the Feast”

a sermon by

Rev. Katie Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
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Our Scripture lesson this third Wednesday in Advent comes from the book of Isaiah chapter 55:1-13. We have been looking at the Advent season through the eyes of this prophet who shares a greater vision with the people Israel in their captivity, and with us. Hear the Word of God:

“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. 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. 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. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 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. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 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. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, 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 purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting covenant that shall not be cut off. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

Holy and merciful God, as you go before us in all things surely you go before us now, preparing our hearts to receive your Word, and paving the way for our understanding. As the anticipation of the celebration of the birth of your Son builds in our hearts and minds so too do we continue to anticipate the ways you continue to work in our lives for purposes that are beyond our understanding, and with a love that cannot be contained in a solitary heart but overflows into a community throughout time gathered as disciples in your name. We invite you into our presence this hour, this day, and always and ask for your blessing. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

How much would it cost for us to be happy? How many presents would have to be under the tree for it to be a merry Christmas morning? How big the Christmas bonus? How tall the tree? What will this season cost us? How much are we willing to give? My husband and I, who do not have children, recently had our first taste of the compelling holiday shopping quest for young ones when one of our best friends graciously responded to our request for what her seven year old son might like from us for Christmas. Our hearts sank when she said he was getting a Gameboy, but we were quickly consoled by hearing that he only asked for educational games. His request seemed simple enough-

until after a little research and 7 stores later, spanning 2 malls, one freestanding gaming facility, a toy store, and every online merchant imaginable, we found that the one game that this sweet special little child wanted is apparently one of the more popular games in the entire country at this given point in time. A bitter Ebay bidding war and twice the retail price later, and my husband and I were shipping his gift-wrapped game to New Jersey with a feeling of great accomplishment. Not only had we conquered the ultimate consumer challenge, but it is a rare occasion that one gets to actually confront the boundaries of their own sensibilities and completely disregard them for something so trivial. That one gets to experience first hand the power of a society that will actually make you feel victorious when you have completely abandoned your own principles and priorities in the name of the perfect product. How much would it cost to feel that you have accomplished something this Christmas season for those you love? Retail? Super sale? About 5 hours on a perfectly good Saturday? CNN Money.com reports that the cost of all the items in the “Twelve Days of Christmas” song- including the repetitions- rose by 1.6% from last year, to \$66, 334. The 200 percent jump in the price of a French hen (now \$45) was the largest percentage gain. Would \$66 thousand do it? How much would it take to make us feel we have accomplished something in life? I watched the hit TV show the Apprentice the other night for the first time in a season. Donald Trump had brought his apprentice hopefuls into a window lined corner office in the skies of New York City and said to them in his usual manner that needs no adjective, “if you lead a successful life, you could have an office like this.” Is that what this is all about? The office? Is that how God will measure our success? Newsday reports that the busiest shopping hour of the season is from 3-4pm on Christmas Eve. How much would it cost to connect with the true meaning of our Savior’s birth in our lives? How many hours of shopping would it take to arrive at Christmas Eve with a clear conscience?

From the bustle of the shopping malls, beneath the whirr of printing receipts, behind the voices of impatient customers, over the tapping of plastic cards on glass counter tops, the hum of overheating car engines waiting for a parking space, the chatter of children waiting in line to greet Santa, and the jingle of jolly commercials, rises the whisper of the prophet: 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. Listen, that you may live. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. I will make with you an everlasting covenant. The Israelites had determined the cost of their covenant. It would take the perfect king to redeem them in God’s eyes. The success of their covenant community would bear the price tag of purifying a temple that had been disgraced by foreign invaders. The limit of their credit line with God would be determined by the length of time they were in captivity. But Isaiah offered them a new word. No matter what you spend, regardless of the condition of your king, or the quality and number of gifts offered up on the alter, in spite of the holy food you consecrate for yourselves, none of it is of consequence to salvation. For God has written a new order based not on bloodline, or ability to adhere to the laws and rituals constructed by generation upon generation, but on faith. Success under God costs nothing but belief, and joy in the Lord cannot be bought because it is freely given. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen

carefully, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Seek the Lord while he may be found.

It is interesting to see what the prophet does with the notion of agency here. He turns the tables just when it looks like humanity thinks they have it all figured out. It is not Israel's royal line or our ability that determines the condition of the covenant, but God. It is God who has chosen to see righteousness in the place of sinners. To free salvation from the hold of royalty. Who provides what we truly need to be content in our lives. It is God who has extended grace beyond measure, but it is us who have to accept it. It is a hard Word that Isaiah offers, because we are well acquainted with all that we think we need to be in right relationships. To make the season special. To be successful in life, or to just get by. It is I, at least, who pour my energy and affection into finding the toy that will be the perfect gesture of my love for a child instead of just pouring my energy and affection into him.

It is not the sacrifice or the temple, or the king, or even our consumerism that is the issue. But it is the futility of our preoccupation with these things that Isaiah longs to free Israel from- to free us from. It is the preoccupation that threatens to overwhelm our senses and confuse us into focusing so much on ordering all the stuff of Christmas that we forget that all that we seek to fulfill within ourselves and with others is offered freely by God, and just waiting for us to be home so it can be delivered. This is the promise of Advent. This is the promise of Christ. This is the face of God unlike any the world has ever seen. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. It is not our ways that will quench our thirst for righteousness. No contrivance of our thoughts alone will satiate our hunger for a successful life. No amount of searching the stores or bidding on Ebay will reveal the meaning of Christmas because we would be seeking these things out in all the wrong places if we looked any further than the arms of God- outstretched to us, and extending life in abundance and depth beyond measure. Life with one another, life within ourselves, life in Christ. Isaiah beckons Israel and now challenges us to look up from the demands we spin for ourselves, from the assumptions we impose upon God, from the requirements of the temple and see that such preoccupations are only obstacles between us and communion with the one true God. Everyone who hungers, come to God's table for the banquet is waiting and all you have to do is take a seat and accept the fact that you cannot write your own invitation, but it has been written for you. You cannot determine what the menu will hold but you can believe that it will satisfy more than you could ever imagine you need. And the celebration that follows will be a memorial to our Lord- that all of creation will be drawn unto him, freed from the captivity of its brokenness will be a tribute to God. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. The meal of salvation is prepared by God. The Advent table is set by you. Welcome to the feast.