

## **LENT 1- Seeking God's ways: From security to generosity**

Isaiah 55

### Scripture Introduction -

This chapter is the end of what's known as Second Isaiah - the so-called 'book of comfort' - spanning chapters 40-55.

At the time that this poem, Isaiah chapter 55, was written, the elite of Judah, from the southern kingdom of Israel, had been in exile, living as refugees, for a little more than two generations.

The primary audience of these chapters in Isaiah were the grandchildren of those who had been forcibly exiled when Jerusalem had fallen in 586 BCE. Living in Babylon, these exiles had kept their identity as Jews telling stories to their children and grandchildren of the glory that had been Jerusalem.

By 538 BCE, however, nearly 50 years later, Babylon had been conquered by the Persians, and the Persian king, Cyrus, allowed the peoples whom the Babylonians had exiled to return to their homelands. In some cases, King Cyrus even funded their return.

Much of Isaiah 40-55 is an exhortation to this community to return - full of the promises of God if they return. Chapter 55 can be read as the poet's final encouragement to make the journey home.

Home. The metaphorical home of their people, but a foreign land for the Jews in Babylon. A call to return home to Jerusalem, a city in ruins. A city, once of power and renown, had not been rebuilt since its destruction by the Babylonians fifty years earlier.

These refugees were being asked to return to a place where there were struggles for land good enough to make a living. To a place of desolation, a place that needed to be rebuilt - houses, city walls, the whole infrastructure. There were no prestigious jobs for skilled laborers waiting for them.

No, It was not an attractive prospect for a generation who had no personal experience of the old city. So, with that as the backdrop, here these words of the prophet:

READ TEXT

SERMON:

Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!

Ho...Ho - a Hebraic word meaning something like woe or Owy... an exclamation calling the listener to pay attention *Ha!* (though with a twinge of longing)<sup>1</sup>.

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come...  
everyone who has no way to pay...come*

The return to Jerusalem would not be an easy one.

Lurking behind this text is the reality that many Jews living in Babylon at the time did not choose to return to Jerusalem. Archaeological evidence suggests that by this time of return, the Jewish community had been integrated into Babylonian society. They had jobs, owned homes, and even lent money to others. Under the Babylonians and Persians, they were free to worship Yahweh. And, these cities where they had made a home for themselves, were the financial, commercial, and cultural centers of that part of the ancient world. They were living in the place of material flourishing.

It's in that context that Isaiah is imploring this community to return. Return home - to a place that feels like a foreign land, but is the spiritual home of the followers of Yahweh.

The poem begins by contrasting real food, with a promise of something better. Real food, which does not satisfy for long, is like the material stuff of our daily lives.

The writer pressures the exiles to recognize that the tangible wealth that they enjoy in Babylon is nothing compared to God's abundance.

Over and over, the poems in earlier chapters expressed the possibility of return, with chapter 55, this poem, being the summary of all the reasons for return - bringing together all those themes -

moving from the imagery of food and drink (verses 1-2) to the restoration of the Davidic line (3-5), then calling the audience to seek God (6-7), and ending with the promise that God will cause even the desert to bloom if they return.

The listener is asked to imagine that God's power, beyond our scope of understanding, will transform the landscape that has been destroyed into a place of welcome and abundance, with those pernicious weeds being replaced by towering trees.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/1945.htm>

This poetry of imagination was written for people that had found some security in a new culture, being asked to return to an unfamiliar place. They are being asked to trust in God's abundance, not their own.

I listened this week to the story of Colette Pichon Battle.

Colette Pichon Battle<sup>2</sup> is a native of the bayou of Louisiana - where her family has lived since before the founding of this country - free people of color living on the land, with the ebb and flow of the tides of land and sea.

Colette left that community, went to college, the first woman of color from that community to go to law school. She was working in Washington DC, when on August 29, 2005, she watched, in horror, a storm unlike her family had ever known, descend upon her homeland. Growing up, hurricanes weren't something to be afraid of - they knew how to live in them and through them - her community would gather, watch, wait and care for one another through the storms.

But this one was different - she could tell that from the weather maps she watched on TV, calling her mom and telling her to do something she'd never done before - get out. Go. Now.

Katrina's devastation was not man made in that part of the bayou - no, it wasn't a broken levee, for them it was a tidal surge off the ocean - a surge of nearly 30 feet that washed it all away. Nothing was left. Fields of green were covered with brown mud, killing everything. The bayou, once a place of such abundant life, was now full of death.

Colette describes Hurricane Katrina as 'a crack in the universe'.

It was, at a meeting at the White House, when the head of FEMA said "The disaster process in this country is designed for the middle class."

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It was in hearing those brutally honest words that she found her calling.

The disaster process in her country - the laws; they were not created to take care of people like her people. No, her people were exiles wanting to rebuild from the ruins, but without help from the power centers of society.

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come...  
everyone who has no way to pay...come*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/colette-pichon-battle-placed-here-in-this-calling/#transcript>

And so she returned home, to that place where land meant freedom for the black and brown people of her community.

She returned home and helped found the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy, which works on issues from equitable disaster recovery to global migration.

Because, she says, climate justice is about belonging; it's about home. And it's about community. She went home and worked on the nitty gritty - deciphering FEMA documents, listening to story after story of loss, hope and a desire to see something new rise out of the devastation.

Katrina may be a faint memory for many of us, but Colette says, on some level, Katrina was an invitation -

because we are all experiencing transformation in some way -  
the places we love and come from are changing - experiencing the cracking open.

Maybe not so unlike the cracking open of the followers of Yahweh in Isaiah's time.

The poetry of Isaiah asks the people to - step away from what you know, from the security you have created for yourself, and trust in God's abundance. Imagine something different - imagine God's freedom born out of rubble and destruction.

The cracking open for Colette Pichon Battle, for those in exile in Babylon - and for the ones for whom the gospels were written -

transformation asks us to step away from the security we think we've created and trust; trust in something else - God's abundance.

In our gospel passage today, when the devil tempts Jesus - he lures him into actions that imply a lack of trust in God.

Through each temptation, the devil invites Jesus to abandon trust in God, and imagine instead that he can trust in himself alone, for nourishment, for empowerment and finally for security.

3 times the devil tempts J to abandon his humanity. 3 times J refuses, insisting that what it means to be human is to rely on God, to live in communion with God, to rely on God's generosity.<sup>3</sup>

As we step into Lent, we know that the way of christian faith includes suffering, risk as well as joy. To follow J is to follow the suffering servant, and that path includes difficulties and losses. the way of love and justice always does, even as it includes plenty of blessings and joy.

We might see Isaiah, and Jesus, pointing us toward a new way of seeing God's spirit of generosity at work-

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Myer Bolton. Podcast: *Strange New World*, March 1, 2022.

For our ways are not God's ways. No, God's ways imagine something few of us can - hope born from death.

May we join those before us on this journey of suffering and joy.