

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 34:2-4; 6-8; 9-11; 12+18-20 *R: I will bless Our God always.*

James 3:13-18

Luke 7:11-17

The Ways of God

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Isaiah 55 is a famous passage. It strikes a powerful note of consolation and hope. The opening imagery is inclusive, inviting and welcoming. God reaches out to "everyone", encouraging them to "come", offering them that which nourishes: water and milk, each essential to human survival at different stages of life. Those without money – the poor - are invited, invited to market to buy, and to God's table to eat, that which is priceless. Here all can buy without money and eat bread that satisfies. God takes the initiative. God makes the invitation. At table, God is the hostess. The occasion is joyful. Wine, not just water, is available; wine which warms and relaxes the body and releases the emotions; the fruit of the vine and work of human hands; wine which holds within it the inherently contradictory possibilities of debauchery and spiritual enrichment and ecstasy.

These verses pose rhetorical questions that prompt self scrutiny about how we spend our time and our money, inviting us to reconsider. God offers us access to this life giving water, milk, bread and wine. We have only to listen to God. All who incline their ear to listen are welcome to participate in God's covenant relationship. The Davidic covenant, which once bound Israel together in a unique relationship to God, is stretched to the ends of the earth. And so is God's invitation to come, to buy, to eat, to live.

The reading from the book of James elucidates the meaning of wisdom from a Christian perspective. It identifies wisdom with good works done with gentleness rather than works done from envy and ambition. God's wisdom, in contrast to the wisdom of the world, is "pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of hypocrisy or partiality." The last is critical. God's wisdom involves the absence of partiality, the affirmation of the value of each person in God's scheme. For James, the harvest of righteousness is a harvest sown in peace for those who make peace.

The passage from Luke's gospel addresses themes raised in both the 2nd Isaiah and James readings: the absence of partiality, or the universality of God's vision, and the true meaning of wisdom. To these themes, Luke adds prophecy. The passage follows immediately after Jesus raised from the dead the son of the widow of Nain. The witnesses spread the word that "A great prophet has arisen among us." The word reached John the Baptist, who sent disciples to Jesus to ask if he was the long awaited Messiah. As usual, Jesus responded to the relatively direct question about his identity with an indirect answer. He pointed to his good works as the evidence of his identity, referring to the passage from 3rd Isaiah which he read in the synagogue at Nazareth: the blind see; the lame walk; lepers are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; and the poor have the good news preached to them.

After John's disciples depart, Jesus talks to the crowds about John. As 2nd Isaiah did, he uses rhetorical questions to point out that John represents values different from those applauded by their culture such as wealth, luxury, prestige and power. Jesus acknowledges that they were drawn to John from a traditional, Jewish perspective: They recognized John as a prophet. Interestingly, the most important title for *Jesus* in Luke is also prophet. Luke takes the position that Jesus is the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18:15-18. Jesus is the prophet like Moses whom God promised Moses God would raise up. Luke's Jesus directs the crowd to interpret John as *more* than a prophet, namely, the one to come before the Messiah as foretold in the writings of the prophet Malachi.

At the same time, Jesus emphasizes that, from God's perspective, although there is no human being greater than John, the least in God's reign are greater than John. It sounds like, and is, a contradiction in terms. It's a paradox, what eastern religions might call a "koan". It captures a complicated truth about God's values which are, as 2nd Isaiah noted, so dramatically different from human values. Jesus comments on the refusal of religious leaders of their time to take John and his baptism seriously. Jesus notes the contrasting response of tax collectors and sinners, whose willingness to *seek* John and his baptism reflected their awareness of their need for conversion. This passage concludes with Jesus' comment on the people of their time: No one can please them or win their respect. Not even God.

John is at one extreme. He is an ascetic; and people accused him of being possessed by the demonic. Jesus is at the other

extreme. He eats and drinks with everyone, religious leaders and those he serves. He's accused of being a drunk and a glutton, a man who associates with "the wrong type of people" [tax collectors and sinners]. Jesus' final comment captures concepts articulated in both Isaiah 55 and James 3: "Wisdom is vindicated by all her children." By this Jesus means that, both Jesus and John, as different as they and their lifestyles are, are manifestations of God's wisdom, though both are rejected by most of the people of their time who judged them by human standards.

It's easy to see as Luke tells the story how misguided many, if not most, of the religious leaders of Jesus' time were in their understanding of wisdom and prophecy. It's easy to accept uplifting images of radical universality and inclusion when we project them backward in time into Jesus' life. It's much harder when we look at our own lives and times to discern what wisdom is, who the prophets are, and what radical inclusion means concretely in our lives. God's call, God's invitation, to live the values described by 2nd Isaiah, Jesus and James, is much more difficult to accept. It's difficult to "buy" into these concepts of God's market and table. Yet, we are called to do just that... to determine what wisdom, universality and prophecy mean in our time from God's perspective. Do they mean making war in Iraq and Afghanistan? Do they mean intervening in Darfur and Somalia for humanitarian purposes? Do they mean, really mean, that *everyone* God calls is welcome? Do they mean *all* are invited to covenant with God? If so, is it *ever* right for us to turn someone away from God's market or table, to declare someone uninvited? How is it *possible* to act authentically, routinely, without envy and ambition? *How* do we live peaceably? *How* do we live without a trace of hypocrisy or partiality?

We struggle to discern the answers to these questions with the help of Scripture, tradition, prayer, worship and community. Perhaps only three things *are* clear: (1) There are different ways to live God's values, as different as the ways of John and Jesus were. (2) God's ways are radically different from the ways ordinary human instinct drives us to live. And (3) God's way is never easy, though God promises joy, fulfillment and life to those who tend to, and live according to, God's ways.

Let's pray God gives us the insight to perceive, and the courage to live, God's universality and wisdom, the grace to be open to the prophets of our time, that we might partake of the water, milk, bread and wine of God.