

Hungering and Thirsting

Isaiah 55:1-15 & Matthew 14:13-21

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First Presbyterian Church, Luling

A million years ago, I let my brother talk me into an overnight backpacking trip in the mountains. We were going to hike all day up to a lake, spend the night, and then hike back all the next day. It was a terrible idea for me to agree to. We were relying on my brother's backpacking experience entirely, I wasn't in good enough shape, and a good part of my agreement was because I could see how bad he wanted to go. We loaded up our backpacks and immediately had a problem. Guidelines for backpacking, especially at high altitude, say you should only be carrying 10-20% of your body weight. Neither one of us were very big, so that didn't give us much leeway to carry what we thought we needed. I can't remember what all we left behind, and our packs were probably still too heavy.

One of the things that is not negotiable to take on a backpacking trip is water. We had these water bag things and a filter, because we were confident we would find creeks, springs, and then the lake itself, to refill our water bag things. Well, my brother was confident. I was nervous. Hiking in the mountains, where the air is dry and there is simply not enough oxygen to breathe, means I get thirsty instantly, and I stay thirsty. But I was worried about drinking up all our water before we would be able to filter and refill it. So I would only drink when I had to, less often than I wanted to. And the worst part was that the spouts on these water bag things were teeny tiny, and it was awkward to hold them up and drink from them, and not enough water ever came out at a time to gulp down in big refreshing drinks. As a result, I was thirsty the whole time. I mean, I was able to enjoy the pretty scenery and being outside, but I never felt like my thirst was ever satisfied. The scarcity of water that wasn't real, but that I perceived, contributed to my lack of satisfaction, I'm sure.

Scientists and human experience tell us that humans can live for about 3 weeks without food, but only about 3 or 4 days without water. Hunger and thirst are the most basic of human drives or yearnings. Isaiah, with the words God gives him, draws on hunger and thirst to reassure the Israelites who are in exile. He calls out to all who are thirsty and invites them to come to the water. He goes on to invite the people to God's banquet table, where wine and water and milk flow freely, where there is food enough for everyone, where everything is a free gift of God. That imagery should sound familiar to you, as it gets picked up for the sacrament of communion.

Isaiah intentionally was using hunger and thirst both literally and spiritually. A double meaning. We see that especially in verses 6 and 7: "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." Those who are hungry and thirsty are instructed to seek the Lord, to ask for mercy and pardon, spiritual things, and again those are themes that connect to our own gatherings around the communion table. Jesus uses hunger and thirst in a similar way. Luke records Jesus as saying, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." (6:21). That's a pretty literal, bodily hunger. Matthew has a more spiritualized version that we usually like better, or at least remember better, in the Beatitudes. In Matthew, Jesus says "blessed are

those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (5:6). Both are in line with Isaiah’s invitations, too. Those who are hungry and thirsty, literally, and those who are hungry and thirsty, spiritually, are invited to come and drink and eat and feast.

Those themes of literal and spiritual hunger continue on into the Gospels, with the story of the feeding of the 5000, which is one of the few miracles of Jesus that appears in all four Gospels. The people—that huge crowd of people—are both literally and spiritually hungry. And I’ll go ahead and suppose that they’re thirsty too, literally and spiritually. And Jesus invites them to the same kind of banquet that Isaiah envisioned, a banquet where everyone was invited, there was an abundance of food—plenty of food and even leftovers.

And that is a gift, a spiritual gift, that Jesus gives us. Because just like my water on the backpacking trip, it is our perception of scarcity that prevents us from fully living in joy. When Jesus promises us, and gives us, abundance, abundance beyond our needs and everyone else’s needs too, it feeds our souls.

A La Grange colleague shared this poem with me this week. It’s called I AM the Bread of Life By Malcolm Guite

Where to get bread?

An ever-pressing question

That trembles on the lips of anxious mothers,

Bread for their families, bread for all these others;

A whole world on the margin of exhaustion

And where that hunger has been satisfied,

Where to get bread? The question still returns;

In our abundance something starves and yearns,

We crave fulfillment, crave and are denied.

And then comes One who speaks into our needs,

Who opens out the secret hopes we cherish,

Whose presence calls our hidden hearts to flourish, Whose words unfold in us like living seeds:

Come to me, broken, hungry, incomplete, I am the bread of life, break me and eat.