

“Without Money and Without Price”
Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9 (selected); Psalm 63:1-8
Lent 3

Psalm 63:1-8

¹O 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Isaiah 55:1-3, 6-9

¹Ho, 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.

²Why 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.

³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
⁷let 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.

⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Introduction

In the unfolding narrative of Luke, Jesus has already “set his face to go to Jerusalem,” toward his earthly life’s ultimate encounter with the cross. His ministry has started to become overwhelmingly public; there are crowds all the time, and he is always teaching, to the extent that it almost feels like a certain desperation has overshadowed Jesus and the disciples as they’re on their way. He is teaching all the time now, even in the midst of healing and feeding and attracting ever greater crowds, as he makes his inexorable way to Jerusalem.

He’s praying in a certain place, and his disciples say, “Teach us to pray,” and so he teaches them what you and I now know as The Lord’s Prayer.

Then he casts out a demon from somebody, and some are amazed, and some say he could only do that by the power of a demon, and some keep demanding a sign from heaven; and to all of this he responds with instructions and corrections and admonitions.

A woman shouts something about Jesus’ mother being blessed, and he says, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!”

The more he keeps teaching, the greater the crowd grows, and the larger the crowd gets, the more he teaches.

At one point Jesus tells a long parable, and Peter’s first comment is, “Were you just talking to us, or was that for everybody?”

Which leads to more teaching of the crowd, and to the gospel reading from Luke 13.

Luke 13:1-9

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

²Jesus asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³I tell you: no. But unless you repent, you will all perish, as they did.

⁴Or 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? ⁵I tell you: no. But unless you repent, you will all perish—just as they did.”

⁶Then 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. ⁷So 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?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

The Sermon

Here is another segment from the prayer poem for Lent by Ted Loder called “Catch Me in My Scurrying.”

Catch me in my mindless scurrying, Lord,
and hold me in this Lenten season:
hold my spirit to the beacon of your grace
and grant me light enough to walk boldly,
to feel passionately,
to love aggressively;
grant me peace enough to want more,
to work for more
and to submit to nothing less,
and to fear only you...
only you!

Bequeath me not becalmed seas,
slack sails and premature benedictions,
but breathe into me a torment,
storm enough to make within myself
and from myself,
something...
something new,
something saving,
something true,
a gladness of heart,
a pitch for a song in the storm,
a word of praise lived,
a gratitude shared,
a cross dared,
a joy received.ⁱ

If we went around the sanctuary right now and everybody was invited to give the weather report of our lives, particularly examining the state of your relationship with God, what would your weather report be this morning?

I loved it when Jim Weyman said a couple years ago, “Climate is what you expect; weather is what you get.” How would you describe the weather of your relationship with God, *this morning*?

Would you say that it’s sunny, or overcast? Chilly, or unseasonably warm, or bitterly cold? Dry and parched, or pouring rain? Dangerous winds? Storm clouds gathering? High or low pressure? What is your personal weather report this morning—particularly in your relationship with 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.*

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

We bring the strands of our lives into the sanctuary, Sunday after Sunday, and we are surrounded by people who are bringing their often secretly

shattered lives to God, to the Church, to the foot of the cross, ready and perhaps even hopeful for comfort, strength, answers...

As Miller Williams has written,

“Have compassion for everyone you meet,
even if they don’t want it.

What seems conceit, bad manners, or cynicism
is always a sign of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.”ⁱⁱ

God invites each of us into an ever-deepening exploration of the meaning of our relationship with God—and a consideration of what that means, or should mean, for the things we do with the life we’ve been given.

For what are you responsible to God?

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,” Jesus says in Mark 12, “and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.

“There is no other commandment greater than these.”

For what are you responsible to God?

Last week at the NEXT Church national gathering in Atlanta, a couple of Presbyterian pastors on opposing sides of a great theological divide, Jeff Krehbiel and Don Meeks, gave a shared testimony about something they had worked up together, which they presented as “a modest attempt at an ‘uncommonly gracious’ conversation among those who may differ on theological matters.”

They said their goal was not to change the minds of the people on the other side, but to be able to speak to the best of the other side’s motivations and arguments.

Without abandoning the ideas and approaches to faith that were most important to each of them, they were both able to be self-critical enough to identify what “their side” has a tendency to overdo, or even get wrong; and,

more importantly, to identify with—not to think like, but to identify with what was important to people on the other side.

When the General Assembly voted a certain way on certain issues in 2014, the guy who had been on the quote “winning side” had the grace to call the guy from the opposite side, and share that he understood and was genuinely concerned about the hurt of people who felt like they and the Church they love had just lost something.

And the recipient of that phone call had the grace to receive it as it was intended.

This was a modest attempt at an ‘uncommonly gracious’ conversation among those who differed on theological matters.

Theresa Latini amplified that concept with her knowledge of “non-violent communication,” a technique and philosophy that emphasizes getting rid of our “enemy images” of people we find disagreeable: stop constructing whole narratives and stereotypes about them,

and instead, when we find ourselves being driven to fury by what someone is saying or doing, think about what the deepest needs may be that that person has—which is at least in part a spiritual matter—and consider how your own deepest needs are influencing the way you react to that person.

At the same gathering, Aisha Brooks-Lytle of Philadelphia—who will be preaching downstairs this summer—preached the kind of sermon that has people bumping into furniture as they leave the sanctuary in a daze: taking a fresh look at the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well, recognizing that Jesus sometimes calls us to initiate difficult conversations with people who may be very different from us in culture, background, race, gender identity, or any other ways we categorize and compartmentalize each other.

Jessica Vazquez Torres compassionately but firmly engaged all of us—a mostly white gathering—in the painful project of recognizing not just the way racism permeates the historical structures of both nation and church, but even more challengingly, to recognize white supremacy, white privilege, and white dominance as continuing to exert a powerful force that causes enormous pain in many lives, including the lives of white people.

She said this influence is felt in structures rather than in relationships, which is why we can have pulpit exchanges between black and white churches, we can celebrate and learn during Black History Month, we can all rally around the enduring prophetic words of Martin Luther King, and majority white churches and majority non-white churches can keep getting together—and should!—but it’s not just about how we relate to one another.

Everybody of goodwill—Republican, Democrat, traditionalist, radical, evangelical, progressive, liberal, conservative—everybody of goodwill wants to have genuine, loving, respectful relationships with people of other races. But we also need to have some potentially painful conversations about ways that we may not be aware of, but by which we inadvertently leave certain people out of the discussion, out of power, out of the ability to survive and succeed to the levels that most of us take for granted being able to achieve.

Jessica Vazquez Torres’s words highlighted those spoken the night before by Allen Boesak, who said,

“To do what God requires,
to engage in a faithful ministry of reconciliation,
we do not need more pulpit swapping
as much as we need a commitment to the fundamental transformation
of our churches, our societies and our world,
to make of them places of the undoing of injustice
and the doing of justice
and the embrace of human dignity.”

He said,

“We are in no position to offer compassion to a suffering humanity
if we do not believe that there *is* good news,
or that the good news for the poor
is such a shattering judgement on our own lack of prophetic faithfulness
that we dare not say it.”

And he quoted John Calvin, who said,

“When the oppressed cry, ‘How long?’ it is as if God hears God’s own self.”

All of these Christian leaders—and you may disagree with some of them or all of them—but each one is wrestling with the question: What is it that God wants me to do with the life God has given me?

When Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, reports were circulating of a horrifying atrocity and an agonizing tragedy that had taken place. There's no other historical record of these happening,ⁱⁱⁱ but the word was that the Roman Governor Pilate had done some appalling thing with the blood of some Galileans, and that elsewhere, in Siloam, a tower had collapsed, killing 18 people.

People in the crowds surrounding Jesus asked him about these things, and he said, "Don't think any of those people died because they were any worse than anybody else."

Every human being on the face of the earth is mortal. We are all vulnerable to calamity, whether the result of human cruelty, or the dumb luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or just, in God's time, reaching the end of the lifespan of our beautiful, mortal bodies.

We have a certain number of days in these bodies, in this life.

What are you going to do with your days?

Are you doing what God put you here to do? Is your relationship with God strong enough, right now, to give you at least a sense of what you could be doing with your days?

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "Look 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?"

And the gardener said, "Please, please, leave it for one more year.

I'll tend it; I'll nurture it; I'll give it every opportunity to bear fruit.

Just please let me have one more year to work with it."

What could you do with one more time around the sun on this planet?

Carrie Newcomer has written:

You
Are holy
And sacred
And utterly unique.
There are gifts you were born to give.
Songs you were born to sing
Stories you were born to tell.
And if you do not give it,
The world will simply lose it.
It is yours alone to offer,
No one can give it for you.
And dearest,
Listen, because this is important,
This wounded world
Needs all the songs we can pull from the air,
Every story that helps us to remember.
It needs every single gift,
Large and small.
And yes, Dearest,
This grateful world does rejoice
Every courageous time
We are true to ourselves and to our gifts.
And so it is,
Dear heart,
We embrace the song
And the story
And all our gifts
Because the world has such great need
And because the world exceedingly rejoices
And because there is no sadder thing
Than to leave this world
Having never really shown up.^{iv}

Jesus says, I, Jesus, am fighting for you,
working for your welfare,
standing up for you,
holding out hope for you.

Do something with this precious opportunity.
Enjoy everything about this abundant life,
and know that the only way to live a truly abundant life
is to share the abundance with the whole world.

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.

Why spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me: eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in God's rich food.

Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price.

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
Even if you have no money,
come, come to God's table;
come, eat and be satisfied.

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February 28, 2016

ⁱ "Catch Me in My Scurrying" in Ted Loder, *Guerillas of Grace*. LuraMedia, 1984.

ⁱⁱ In Miller Williams, *Some Jazz a While: Collected Poems*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hammond & Busch, *The Norton Critical Edition of the English Bible*. New York: Norton, 2012; see n. Luke 13:1-4.

^{iv} "Showing Up" in Carrie Newcomer, *A Permeable Life: Poems & Essays*. Available Light Publishing, 2014. Kindle Edition.