

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Lent 3C, Feb 28, 2016
Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Like many bibles, my Study Bible gives titles to sections of biblical text. These titles are created by the editors of the particular edition and shouldn't be considered part of the biblical text. Still, they can be helpful and enlightening. This week, the section titles or headings in my Study Bible for our readings highlight a stark contrast. The heading for our Old Testament passage from Isaiah today is: "An Invitation to Abundant Life" - a lovely summary of a hopeful passage. The heading for our Gospel reading, on the other hand, is "Repent or perish!" - a not-so-lovely summary of a difficult passage.

What I particularly love about the stark contrast of these 2 titles is how they upend the popular notion of "the God of the Old Testament" as mean, judgemental and legalistic while "the God of the New Testament" is gracious, merciful and loving. Last Monday I learned that this popular notion has been popular for some time. In fact, drawing strong distinctions between the character of God in the Old Testament versus the New goes back at least to the early second century - before the books of the New Testament were even decided upon. Back then, a fellow named Marcion was perhaps the strongest proponent of the idea that Jesus was the incarnation of a good and loving God, wholly distinct from the evil, Jewish God described in the Old Testament. The movement he began, called Marcionism, was deemed heretical by second century church leaders but didn't really die out until a few centuries later. I'm not sure that many Christians today would be as extreme as Marcion in their distancing from Christianity's Jewish roots, including the Old Testament texts, but the basic notion of a nice New Testament God and a mean Old Testament God remains common. As a lover of our ancient roots in the Old Testament, I love that our readings today seem to offer a stark, and backwards, contrast: "An Invitation to Abundant Life" on the one hand; and, "Repent or perish!" on the other.

The passage we heard from Isaiah 55 comes from the end of the second major section in the book of Isaiah as we know it. This second section began in chapter 40 and contains some of the most beautiful words of comfort in the bible, beginning with: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..." These are words written to an exiled nation, with a temple and city destroyed and a people broken. They are people God seems to have betrayed, and left for dead, with the latest bully on the block, Babylon. It was into this circumstance of deep grief and confusion that Second Isaiah wrote such beautiful words of comfort and assurance that God had not forgotten or betrayed them. The pain of the moment would not last forever. Restoration would come with a new exodus: "For you shall go out with joy, and be led back in peace..." (55:12a) Exile will end one day and you will be led back to Jerusalem with peace and joy.

Our reading today comes just before this glorious promise of renewal and restoration and it covers a lot of theological ground. It begins with an invitation: "... come to the waters... come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." The invitation is to an

abundant banquet, already set. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen. Eat of great goodness. Delight in rich food. Come to me. Listen. Live. God goes on to remind them of God's everlasting covenant... God's steadfast and sure love for David. It is as grace-filled, generous and loving as anything in the New Testament. There are no caveats, no requirements of following Torah. Just an invitation to abundant life. That is where it all begins.

It isn't, however, where it ends. There is a sense of urgency as the Lord commands the people: Come. Eat. Listen... and as the passage continues, the commands shift in the desired action: Seek. Call. Forsake. Return. From the invitation of abundant grace in banqueting, God's call shifts to one of repentance. The order matters... first comes the banquet, the feast, the grace. Next comes the seeking, the turning to God, the forsaking of wicked ways, the returning to God. It is the Gospel of love from start to finish. First the good news in the call to abundant life; then the good news in the call to repentance.

The feel of today's Gospel from Luke could hardly be more different as Jesus twice warns: "Unless you repent, you will all perish...!" Jesus is spurred by people telling him of Galileans whom Pilate killed, presumably trying to prove that "those people" clearly must have done something to cause such calamity. But Jesus will have none of it: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" "No, I tell you..." And Jesus goes on to offer his own example: Remember "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? No, I tell you..." How disappointed the crowd must have been! For those experiencing good times, it can be a comforting notion to believe that bad things only happen to bad people; that sin is the cause of calamity. It might be a good way to push away uncertainty or fear, at least while things are good, but it does so at a cost. As one commentator describes: "If God is responsible for everything that happens, and God is a just God, then calamities must be the result of human sinfulness. The fallacy in such logic is the notion that God is the immediate cause of all events, which leaves no room for human freedom or freedom in the created order, and therefore for events that God does not control." Instead, Jesus insists on human responsibility: "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." We are no better and no worse than those who suffer. "... Life is uncertain, death is capricious and judgement is inevitable" and so the need for repentance is urgent. (NIB, 270)

The urgency continues as Jesus tells a parable of a fig tree that hasn't produce fruit for at least 3 years. The doomed fig tree's owner instructs the gardener: "Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" The gardener, however, asks for a short reprieve: "let it alone for one more year..." and the gardener promises to give the tree some extra attention in the hopes that next year, it will bear fruit. "If not," the gardener concludes, "you can cut it down." Finally, we hear of some mercy, though the urgency of repentance remains. The judgement, the fate of certain death, is not alleviated, it is just delayed unless something changes. Jesus' warning is not overturned... the risk has not abated... it is, however, tempered with more time and some extra TLC.

Isaiah began with an invitation to abundant life before calling for repentance. Jesus begins with a call to repentance before offering the hope of forgiveness. It comes as a shock given that we are so acculturated, so expectant, of a harsh Old Testament God and a nice, gentle

God in Jesus. Today we hear the messages reversed in some ways and yet more than the grace of forgiveness that we are so use to hearing, our passages today both point to grace in repentance.

It would be nice if forgiveness and repentance were easily related in a causal relationship. It would be lovely if everyone was aware of every misstep and simply repented any and every time we did wrong. If it were so, the world would be just about perfect. But though repentance and forgiveness are related, one does not cause the other. They can even exist independently: we can be forgiven without repenting and we can repent without being forgiven. Sometimes it seems that we're so well versed in forgiveness, we've focussed so much on God's grace of forgiveness that we've come to expect it without the discomfort of actually doing anything differently. We might confess - say we're sorry - but the call to repentance is much more challenging. The call to repentance is a call to change... to turn around... to forsake a wrong choice... to take a different path. Repentance might begin in a moment of revelation - a moment of understanding that we have done something wrong... but living out repentance is a process that takes a lifetime of self-reflection, vulnerability and courage.

In the end, we can only be responsible for our side, our actions. For some of us, we need to hear the encouragement from Isaiah today that our life of repentance can spring from our enjoyment of God's abundant feast laid out for us. For others, or at other times in our life, we need to hear the urgency of Jesus' warning, harsh enough to shock us into action that carries us into the peace and joy of the abundant living God wants for us. What grace it is to hear both approaches today! What gift we have in the varying words of God, the multitude of ways God relates to us, that the bible brings to us in every book, New and Old.

May we accept God's freely offered invitation to abundant life through the grace of forgiveness of which Isaiah speaks. May we also hear Jesus' warning to "repent or perish," remembering that while sin doesn't cause calamity, God still yearns for us to choose to make the necessary changes in our lives that will lead to greater joy. May we embrace the abundant life we are graciously given and offer it back to God, living in the grace of repentance.