

# **“Free Lunch”**

## **The Sojourn of God Worship Series**

Sunday, March 24<sup>th</sup> 2019, The Third Sunday in Lent

### **First Baptist Church of Worcester**

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We are a people on a journey, following a God who is also on a journey. For us that journey may be a destination unknown. Our projected path often veers into unforeseen pathways or sometimes even dead ends that require a u turn, often going back to places we thought we'd left behind for good. Often the road we find ourselves on seems more circular than linear.

This season of Lent we have been focusing on the Sojourn of God, the journey that the Holy One has been on since before our finite existence was conceived. Our sacred texts tell stories of the journey that God has been on with this existence we call humanity, spinning on this piece of rock we call the Earth. These journeys of the universe, the human, and Divine, somehow related and intertwined but at times so vastly void of the knowledge of the others.

And in the midst of this disconnected connectedness we have these stories we read today. Stories from our ancestors trying to navigate their relationship in and with the creation and its maker. Today's text brings out the most comforting and some of the more challenging pieces of our inherited texts. We read about the beauty of God's redeemed world in the writings of the prophet and the harsh judgement by God from the apostle. Our own faith tears at polarizing points of belief and understanding. We want to look to our faith for some level of certainty in our often over polarized world. We are creatures that have come to rely on polarity of beliefs and understandings often weighing on our survival as individuals and as a species.

Isaiah is a difficult prophet to understand. The writings attributed to him are long and diverse, and that may be putting it mildly. He often goes into discourses about creatures that could conjure up nightmares if read before going to bed. He is a passionate prophet speaking during one of Israel's most troubling ages, the Babylonian exile. But this text here in chapter 55 is one of the most beautiful in the entire book. The chapter opens with a call to have our basic needs met, whether we think we can afford to or not. The prophet calls, Come and buy wine and milk with no money! Can you imagine a claim? Even now? Thousands of years removed. This is free sustenance that cannot be purchased; currency is not necessary. To the Jewish people in exile, under an empire that would have exploited and inflated costs of basic needs this would be a nearly unimaginable dream, as it is for many people today.

The prophet goes on to talk about the reign of peace that God intends the people of Israel to experience as they someday move from exile to restoration. He remembers back to the exodus of the people of God from Egypt which the Jewish people hold in sacred remembrance, even into modern times. It is possible though that Isaiah isn't speaking only about a geographical exodus from exile as their ancestors experienced but an exodus from an understanding that they cannot

be the people that God intends them to be while outside of Jerusalem. The exodus from Egypt was an escape from bondage and slavery, but the exodus that Isaiah writes about is one that leads them into well-being and calmness in joy and peace.

Walter Brueggemann writes that, “The departure is here offered as a dramatic geographic transfer back to Zion. And ultimately, in context, it is indeed geographical. If, however, one takes the rhetoric of exilic Isaiah seriously, it is unmistakable that before there can be any geographical departure from the empire, there must be a liturgical, emotional, imaginative departure. Israel in exile must be able to think and feel and imagine its life out beyond Babylonian administration.”

This realization of exodus for the people of God in Egypt, the people of God in Babylon, the people of God under the Romans, and the people of God today, including us; must be believed in our minds before we can see it realized in the world. We believe the saying that there is no such thing as a free lunch, and this text takes that belief and turns it upside down, “Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat! Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!” The prophet is reminding the reader and hearer that the only thing that will truly satisfy our hunger is freely given to us who choose to partake. He also questions why, when we do have money and resources to spend, do we spend it on things that will not satisfy us?

This is a place where the sojourn of God and the journey of each of us comes into conversation. The Holy One is ever extending an invitation to freely given and abundant fulfillment, a feast that will nourish us to eternal and abundant life. But in some failing of humanity we find it unbelievable that this could all come with no cost or price. We buy into the lie that nothing comes without a price, and little comes without a cost that negatively affects our upward mobility, success, or security. War is necessary for peace to prevail. Others suffer so that I might thrive. Prison is necessary for a peaceful society. These are the ways of the world where there’s no such thing as a free lunch.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” Isaiah 55:8

As beautiful and ideal as this vision a renewed creation is, it does still come at a cost, though not one that we give in exchange for an invitation to God’s table. It isn’t a free lunch as much as we would like it to be, or in the way that we may initially think after reading this passage in Isaiah. And herein lies a paradox of these scriptures. God is the author, the rule maker, and God’s journey with us is toward justice, peace, and reconciliation of the entire creation, beginning in each of us individually.

My understanding of our Christian faith tradition and history revolves around a table. Not our table but God’s table. The Story of Christ was to move our understanding of God from a centralized sacrificial altar table for worship, to sharing the person of Christ that we find in one another around tables of fellowship and sharing. Isaiah speaks of this sharing of food and drink whose nourishment is everlasting.

This is God’s Sojourn and we’re invited to participate and join in as co pilgrims on a quest back to the garden where and when it was good, very good.

Seats at God's table are free and available to all who may want to join in this feast, the cost is not to gain entrance but, in our ability, and desire to remain.

The work of Jesus was to extend the invitation to us that God had been offering for millennia. In the mystery of the incarnation we see God's journey to earth in the person of Jesus to call us to this table of sharing our journeys with one another. However, if we have accepted this free invitation to be at God's table we realize that are expectations for our actions and behaviors lest we grieve the heart of our host.

It is important that we remember that this table of God's extends in all directions from where we find ourselves in time and space. It extends to the far reaches of the ancient past to those of many faiths; into the yet unknown future, and spans the breadth and depth of the known world, providing space for all who seek to come and partake of the extravagant feast our God has laid before us. We are not seated at this table alone, or just with the Divine One.

When we take our seat at this table we are required to let go of the stones of expectation that we carry. That is the cost of being at this feast. In exchange for our seat, we take on the expectations of the Holy One. We lay down stones of expectation that our worthiness to be at this table is linked to our monetary value and performance, expectations that perfection is possible, expectations that our work in the world, perhaps even for the church, deserves this reward of feasting with God.

You may be surprised to know that I sometimes struggle with social anxiety. In most social contexts with large groups of people, it's easy for me to take to a flight response and quietly leave a place where the unfounded possibility of judgement or not being successful at small talk and introductions could be overwhelming. In the same vein I also gravitate toward familiar people in settings with an abundance of people I don't know well. If you find yourself at an event with me with and a lot of strangers, you will probably become my best friend very quickly. I avoid strangers at almost all cost, which sometimes conflicts with my vocational calling to minister to all. It's something I am continually aware of and working on in myself. That being said, the idea of coming to God's table where I may find myself surrounded by strangers can be utterly dreadful. So, when I am called to, and accept God's invitation I have to put down my stone of insecurity and anxiety.

How often when we come into a group of people do we assess their worthiness to be present? We may ask, who invited them to be here? Do they really belong? We judge their personhood and value from our often-flawed perspective. This is part of our human nature that being at this table begs us to overcome.

The seats we find ourselves in at God's table are not our choice. They have not been particularly assigned to ensure familiar conversation. My seat is probably surrounded by strangers. How often do we hear about the stress related to the strategic placement of name cards to avoid challenging conversations or situations that may make others uncomfortable or lead to a disruption at an event or meal. Some of you may have this struggle and stress as you plan holiday

gatherings. We ask ourselves, how can I try to control the interactions of others to create an illusion of peace.

When we take a seat at this table, we are accepting the fact that we must also let go of our often-flawed prejudices, differences, and disagreements and recognize above all else the divine humanity and goodness that our Creator has breathed into us, not individually, but as the beloved community of the human race.

When we take our seat at this table. We must agree work to remove all our judgements. We agree to not point out differences. We agree not to have any performance expectations. We agree not to hold anyone accountable to anything other than the greatest commandment, to love one another as our host at this table has equally loved us. Remember, this meal was given freely to you and I as a gift. And nothing we can do can create a hierarchy whereby any one person or group can be dismissed from among us due to our direct or indirect judgments.

While this table is open to all and free to all, from our epistle reading today, we know that God intends to hold us accountable to our actions as we partake of this feast. While God desires to dismiss no one from this table, the stakes are still high. God knows that our best selves can be found at this table, in this sharing of life together in harmony. However, should a person not be able to let go of their stones they may find themselves outside this beloved fellowship. Not by an action of the host but by our own inability or willingness to live into the covenant that having our seats requires. Actions that will grieve the heart of God by their in-humanity, hostile words to another, judgement, self-promotion, or simply choosing that the costs is too high.

People who believe they are seated at this table in communion with God and one another may find themselves picking up their stones again and walking away without realizing it until they are far off and hungry again.

Perhaps it was simply a lack of humility that drove the people of God in circles for 40 years until they missed out on the fulfillment of God's promise that the Apostle reminds us of. Perhaps inability to accept the invitation to God's continual feast of provision was their downfall. Maybe following their freedom from slavery, they began to rely upon their own wisdom and self-sufficiency. God had broken a chain of oppression over them, but could they then live under a freedom that was otherworldly for their context? God as deliverer became more important than God as sustainer. And once freedom was tasted it became unbridled and they forgot to whom they should give thanks for it. In a time when people were always the property or domain of another, could they even fathom what true freedom was? They had experienced a geographic exodus but their minds and ideals were still tied to the empire they wanted so desperately to be free from. The final lines of today's epistle reading say that, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you get tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

On this journey we should remember that absence from this table is not absence from God. We too are on a journey. We come and go from this table. Each time bringing a new stone to leave, to replace with bread that nourishes us and wine that wets our parched soul. And each time we come, perhaps we stay a while longer. We share deeper stories with strangers who also come and go. We find assurance in the fact that this table is always set. The meal is always prepared. The host beckons us to come to be formed and reformed. God is moving toward the reconciling of creation, and this table extends to us and for us until that day.

*Miranda works the late night counter*

*In a joint called Betty's Diner*

*Chrome and checkered tablecloths*

*One steamy windowpane*

*She got the job that shaky fall*

*And after hours she'll write till dawn*

*With a nod and smile she serves them all*

*Here we are all in one place*

*The wants and wounds of the human race*

*Despair and hope sit face to face*

*When you come in from the cold*

*Let her fill your cup with something kind*

*Eggs and toast like bread and wine*

*She's heard it all so she don't mind*

*You never know who'll be your witness*

*You never know who grants forgiveness*

*Look to heaven or sit with us*

*Deidra bites her lip and frowns*

*She works the stop and go downtown*

*She's pretty good at the crossword page*

*And she paints her eyes blue black*

*Tristan comes along sometimes*

*Small for his age and he's barely five*

*But she loves him like a mama lion*

*Veda used to drink a lot*

*Almost lost it all before she stopped*

*Comes in at night with her friend Mike*

*Who runs the crisis line*

*Michael toured Saigon and back*

*Hair the color of smoke and ash*

*Their heads are bowed and hands are clasped*

*One more storm has passed*

*Here we are all in one place*

*The wants and wounds of the human race*

*Despair and hope sit face to face*

*When you come in from the cold*

"Betty's Diner" by Carrie Newcomber