**Isaiah’s Imperative Invitation**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**Pittsford, NY 14534**

**February 28, 2016**

**3rd Sunday of Lent**

**Lectionary Passages:**

**Isaiah 55:1-9**

**Psalm 63:1-8**

**1 Corinthians 10:1-13**

**Luke 13:1-9**

1. Have you fed the chickadees in Mendon Ponds Park this winter?
   1. Wes, Rachel and I did that with their Scout troops this winter.
   2. Logos often goes in the fall.
      1. We troop out along Birdsong Trail making enough racket to scare away every living creature in the whole park.
      2. As you can imagine, it is difficult to coax the birds out.
   3. During the winter, the birds are so much hungrier but one still has to coax them out.
      1. Come for the seeds, you that have no money.
      2. Come, peck and eat!
      3. Come, buy seeds without money and without price!
      4. Why do you spend your money for that which is not seed and waste your time for that which does not satisfy?
   4. Isaiah similarly has to coax out the Israelites to partake of God’s grace in this week’s Old Testament Lesson.
      1. He is writing to the Israelites in exile, reminding them that even though they were swept away from Jerusalem in 587BCE, God has not abandoned them.
         1. God is trying to show the Israelites that they are still the children of God and rightful inheritors of the promises to David of blessing, security and peace.
         2. Those promises need not be fulfilled through the temple, but can be realized when we come, listen, and seek God’s will for our lives no matter where we are.
2. How do we play the part of Isaiah today?
   1. How do we invite a weary world to come, listen, and seek the living word of God so we might have life abundant?
      1. How do we invite our own children? Our neighbors? Our friends? Our colleagues?
      2. How do we encourage the children who do come b/c we still have the ability to force them to come, to want to come on their own?
      3. How do we motivate anyone to do what we want that person to do?
   2. The motivation is right here: “listen, so that you may live.”
      1. Live…live…what does Isaiah mean by live?
         1. Living is loving…
         2. Living is giving…
         3. Living is sharing…
         4. Living is cherishing…
         5. Living is soup-kitchening…
         6. Living is storytelling…
            1. Listen…
            2. Listen my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere…
         7. Isaiah says, “Listen, so that you may live.”
      2. The Hebrew word for listen here is weighty with significance.
         1. Shema
         2. Perhaps you’ve heard of shema or THE shema from Deuteronomy 6:4
            1. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home. “
            2. Later in the chapter God says God will give them “cities which they did not build…houses filled with all sorts of good that you did not fill…hews cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the land of slavery.”
            3. Does that sound a little like having wine and milk without money and without price?

God keeps offering us something for nothing.

Grace – God’s unmerited favor.

* 1. And when the Israelites inevitably do forget the Lord their God who brought them out of Egypt, Isaiah turns to many of the parenting tricks we’ve all tried.
     1. See if any of these sound vaguely familiar to you parents or to anybody who has tried to persuade somebody we love to do what we believe is best for them.
     2. Isaiah says “I will make with you an everlasting covenant”
        1. In other words, Let’s Make A Deal!
           1. Positive incentives.
           2. Sticker charts.
           3. Ok, ok, let’s call it what it is – bribery!
     3. Isaiah then holds up God’s track record of favoring David.
        1. Isaiah says, “See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples.”
           1. In other words, do as I say and you too will be a hero like David.

God loved David – the Hebrew word here is hesed – with an agape love that forgave even David’s philandering excesses.

* + - * 1. Isaiah continues, “See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you because the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.”

In other words, “See! People you don’t even know will follow your tweets, like you on Facebook, and vote for you on Dancing with the Stars, all because God has glorified you!”

* + 1. And then, when our loved ones inevitably disappoint us by not doing what we want them to do, we pull out this ace motivator.
       1. Fine, if you don’t do what I want, I’m leaving!
          1. I’m picking up my marbles and going home.
       2. Isaiah phrases it a little more positively:
          1. “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;”

O, HO!

Is God moving away from us when we don’t come, listen, and seek?

* 1. Isaiah says, “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.”
     1. God is that saintly parent who never tires of welcoming the prodigal home.
     2. God’s mercies are new every morning…Great is thy faithfulness Lord unto me.
        1. I suspect this crux moment is why this passage is in our Lenten Lectionary.
        2. We have this beneficent invitation from the most gracious of judges/parents/mentors/coaches/creators/friends to turn, return, repent, run into these loving arms for God will abundantly pardon.
  2. Wait a minute.
     1. What about the quid pro quo?
     2. Isn’t this the God of the Old Testament?
     3. Isn’t this the God who smites people with the jawbones of asses when they disobey God’s commands?
     4. Isn’t this the God who tosses horse and rider into the sea?
     5. Isn’t this the God who overthrew the land of Canaan so a select few could have milk and honey?
        1. What about that wrathful, judgmental God?
        2. Don’t we have to earn God’s favor?
  3. Isaiah comes back with this trump card (no, not THAT Trump card)
     1. “For my thought are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”
     2. With that, Isaiah basically says the ultimate parenting line, “Because I said so and I’m the parent, that’s why!”

1. This particular part of Isaiah makes biblical commentators salivate.
   1. It has two major Old Testament wisdom motifs smashed together.
      1. The first is the wisdom most often expressed by books like Proverbs.
         1. If you do this, you will prosper.
         2. Come, listen, seek.
         3. Do as you are told and you will be rewarded as David was.
         4. Did you notice that this is the only place in Second Isaiah where David is explicitly mentioned?
            1. It is as if the Prophet were waiting to use the ace in the hole of “the good child does this and look what David/Johnny/Pauline Perfect gets?”
            2. This is the wisdom of utilitarianism.

This makes perfect sense to us because the original understanding of wisdom was that of common sense.

Wisdom hokmah in Hebrew; Sophia in Greek – both are feminine words

She calls to people in the streets

She is often compared and contrasted with other women who call in the streets

Wisdom for a king is to judge wisely

Kings in the Bible arose from the same model that gave us Judges eventually

Solomon asked for this wisdom so he could judge well.

* + 1. The second major Old Testament motif is more difficult to grasp but the one that inevitably rings more true to our experiences of hardship, stress, and bad things happening to good people.
       1. This is the contrary wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes which recognizes as the Nissan ads say, “shift happens.”
       2. The problem with the book of Proverbs and so-called Proverbial wisdom as we hear in the first seven verses of Isaiah today is we know that this is mechanical.
          1. Even if one works very hard, the business can crash or the child may have internal or external challenges beyond anyone’s control.
          2. Job and Ecclesiastes correct this mechanical view.

Job’s courtier says Job is purely a yes man.

The courtier alleges that Job’s devotion to God is utilitarian.

All that needs to happen for Job to curse God would be for God to remove God’s blessings from Job.

No more quid pro quo.

But when the blessings disappear and Job does not curse God, Job only rails at God.

God then dresses down Job saying, “Who are you?”

“Where were you when I formed the earth?”

In other words, I’m the parent and you will listen because I say so.

Job was wise enough to see that.

The chickadees know that instinctively.

Just like the sparrows to whom Jesus refers, the chickadees and all of God’s creation don’t toil or spin for they trust God’s steadfast love and they come, listen, and seek.

1. The invitation of imperative Isaiah says ‘come, listen, and seek’ and when we inevitably fail to follow, God’s steadfast love says, ‘come anyways and live.’
   1. In those times Isaiah’s imperative invitation is inevitably hard to follow, we cast about for somebody or something to blame.
      1. Our parents didn’t raise us optimally and/or don’t understand and appreciate us now.
      2. Our spouse or significant other doesn’t love us the way they should.
      3. Our boss doesn’t make use of our real talents.
      4. The world is cold and cruel.
      5. Political candidates are all fools who slander one another.
      6. The economy is in the tank.
      7. Big agriculture is poisoning us with GMOs.
      8. Big pharma is gouging us with drug costs.
      9. We can all come up with other people or situations to blame for our own inability to respond positively to God’s invitation.
         1. The invitation is still there.
         2. God invites us to be wise, either wisely following utilitarian reasoning or wisely recognizing that God’s grace to us is beyond reasoning.
            1. Consider this.
2. We’ve been praying for little Mackenzie Mehlem, Jen Lake’s niece for six months.
   1. She was born very prematurely weighing just a little more than a pound.
   2. She flew home from Hawaii this week to California.
      1. She spent the first five months of her life in the NICU in Hawaii b/c that’s where her mom and dad were on a trip when Mackenzie decided it was time to be born.
   3. Little Mackenzie is a living miracle.
      1. By all reasonable rights, she should not be alive.
         1. But her mom and dad love her.
            1. They wanted her.
         2. They upended their whole lives to live in Hawaii for her for five long months.
      2. NICU nurses will tell you their being there was essential.
         1. Their love kept little Mackenzie alive.
      3. NICU nurses noticed decades ago that the babies who were held by their parents with skin-to-skin contact for significant periods of time would thrive.
         1. Those who didn’t receive that tangible sharing of love, quite tragically died.
   4. Isaiah’s imperative invitation to come, listen and seek God is literally a lifesaver.
      1. It’s an invitation the hungry chickadees accept.
      2. It’s an invitation we can accept for ourselves.
      3. It’s an invitation we can extend to others.
         1. May we do so this Lent and for the rest of our lives.