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Bread of Mercy

Isaiah 55:2b

In the 55th chapter of Isaiah we encounter a prophet who wants his people to eat well. After many years of living in exile in Babylon their long nightmare is coming to an end. The prophet challenges his people to see their journey home as more than just a change in geography. It is a journey which will expose the loyalties and priorities by which they have chosen to live. Will they live by the values of the dominant Babylonian culture or will they follow the word of God? The prophet frames this issue by using the imagery of food. They can travel home living off the bread of Babylon or they can make the journey depending on the bread that God provides. The theologian Walter Brueggemann has described the choice that faced these exiles in the following words:

On the one hand...we must eat. On the other hand the food that is eaten is transformed into loyalty, energy, work, and care. The one who provides the food we eat governs the loyalties we embrace...The poet in Isaiah 55 already knows that much about food. He knows that freedom, well-being, and power to act depend on an alternative bread that is [not] provided by...Babylon...The bread of Babylon is empty and lacks nourishing power. It is junk food (*Cadences of Home: Preaching Among the Exiles*, pages 130-131).

The prophet invites his people to live by the alternative bread that God provides. This bread is received through concrete acts of worship and service. This is the bread of mercy which nourishes our souls.

Jesus challenges his followers to seek the bread that nourishes in the 13th chapter of Luke's gospel. Jesus understands that our craving for bread that does not satisfy comes from our desperation to exercise control over the chaos of our lives. It is that craving that makes us susceptible to the false promises of culture and ideology. Jesus takes aim at these false promises when he addresses the conventional piety of his culture. This view of the world claims that human suffering is the consequence of the sin of the sufferer. Jesus undermines this claim by citing two specific tragedies. One incident had to do with Jews and the other had to do with Gentiles. One tragedy was triggered by human violence and the other was a natural catastrophe. Jesus is pointing out that all human beings are vulnerable to crushing events outside their control. But they do not suffer because of what they have done. Bad things happen to good people. The conventional piety of their culture is simply wrong. We have no control over the chaos that threatens us.

Jesus invites his followers to leave behind their craving to control the chaos. Any value system that promises that kind of control is the bread of Babylon. It is bread that does not nourish. Because we are all vulnerable to illness, poverty, loneliness, and death we must live in dependence on the bread which feeds our souls. Jesus points to the nature of that bread by telling the parable of the fig tree. The parable states that God's priority is not judgment but mercy. The parable is a gracious invitation to worship and serve God. Those who do that delight in the bread of mercy.

In 1636 Scottish Presbyterians of the Ulster colony of Northern Ireland came to appreciate their vulnerability to the forces of chaos. For thirty years they had been living in Ireland at the invitation of King James I. But the next King, Charles I, saw the Presbyterians as a threat to his policy of enforcing strict religious uniformity throughout the British Isles. Thomas Wentworth was installed as Lord Deputy of Ireland and he ruthlessly carried out this new policy. Puritan-leaning bishops were ousted. Presbyterian ministers were removed from their churches. For five years, Scots Irish congregations had no minister to preach, teach, or celebrate the sacraments. This is not the worst of it. Wentworth required Presbyterians to take what was known as the “Black Oath.” This oath explicitly condemned the Covenanter movement through which Scotland was then resisting Charles I’s uniformity policy. Those who refused were issued huge fines or imprisoned.

In the midst of persecution, these Presbyterians understood their dependence upon the bread of mercy. One day five hundred of them arrived in the Scottish seaport of Stranraer. They had made the week long journey together by land and sea to gather at the Lord’s Table. They came hungry for the bread which could nourish their souls. They knew the words of Isaiah, “...eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food (Isaiah 55:2b).”