

Provisions for the Journey: Feast

Third Sunday of Lent

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Texts: Isaiah 55.1-9;
 Psalm 63.1-8;
 1 Corinthians 10.1-13;
 Luke 13.1-9

At some point along the way, every one of us has to face the question Jesus confronted at the start of his ministry. It is the central question in the life of faith: Do we trust God? I suspect you wouldn't be in this room if your answer to that question, at least in theory, was anything other than a resounding "Yes." Few of us who bother to come to worship with any regularity if we believed that we are fundamentally alone in this world. But what we profess and what we believe in theory doesn't always line up so perfectly in our practice of daily life. How many of us, when it comes down to the ways that we live day in and day out, find ourselves being drawn to the alluring temptation Jesus faced in the desert: looking to ourselves and the networks we can create (the deals we can make) to meet our basic needs and to accumulate at least a little bit of wealth and power. That's pretty much the bottom line for a good portion of people in the world; it's what they get up for in the morning. And if we are honest about it, at least on some of our days, we are right there too.

This question of where we place our ultimate trust - where we turn for our provisions - will plague us through our entire journey of faith. It's not a one-time conversation. If the road that Jesus walked was littered with danger and disappointment, you know that ours will be as well. As we saw with Abraham and Sarah last week, they wanted to trust that God would fulfill the promise to give them an heir but when it took too long - when their patience had worn thin - they took matters into their own hands and saw just how destructive those lapses of trust can be.

The question that becomes inevitable is what happens to us when we fall off the road and find our lives unraveling. How does God respond in the

face of our inevitable failure? Some of the followers around Jesus were having a similar conversation but from a different point of view. They wondered when people suffer or when something terrible happens is it a sign that they are sinful? Is it a punishment from God? It's another way of asking the same question: how does God deal with our inevitable failures?

Jesus' answer is clear: "No!" Their suffering is not because they were especially sinful. The ones who suffered were no more sinful than the ones asking the question. You can just see their wheels turning.

"So if that's true, if the bad things that happen in life are not direct consequences for our sin then why bother trying to be good? Why sweat so hard when it comes to temptation?" As if Jesus can hear their minds working, he immediately goes on to say "but I tell you unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Is Jesus offering them comfort in the face of their anxiety? Or is he issuing a warning? Honestly, I think it is both. They are preoccupied with the sin of the people around them and he warns them to pay closer attention to their own life. He tells them to take their judgmental eyes off of their neighbor and take a look at the life that is right in front of them. Frankly, whenever we become concerned with the state of someone else's sinfulness we've probably wandered into some dangerous territory. We'd do better to take that flash light we are shining on someone else's soul and turn it around to examine our own. But interestingly, the parable Jesus tells right after this discussion goes in an unexpected direction.

Using the image of a vineyard, Jesus describes the frustration that comes when the fig tree a man has planted doesn't bear fruit. After three long years there is nothing to show for his investment. He barks at the gardener to "Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" But the gardener isn't so quick to give up on the struggling little tree. He asks permission to shower attention and love and labor into this seemingly hopeless cause. If the question is what God does when we stumble and fall? If the question is what does God do when there is little to show for our efforts and our faith? The answer seems to be that when everyone else is ready to throw in the towel, God gets ready to roll up her sleeves.

The lesson Jesus draws from these tragedies is not “Be careful or God will get you!” The lesson has to do with the limited time we all have to turn our life around and to enjoy the goodness of life as God intends it to be. The tragedy was that time was cut short for those poor souls. The good news is that even with this ticking clock, God’s impulse is to give us another chance. What does God do in the face of our inevitable failures? When everyone else is ready to put an axe at the base of our fruitless tree, God’s the one who pleads our case for just a little more time. Time becomes the instrument of God’s grace; time to change course, regroup, and to try again.

Jesus is serious about this call to repentance. He doesn’t hold back from telling it like it is. He isn’t interested in making you feel comfortable. He is willing to let you squirm. But he’s also willing to give you time. When everyone else rushes to judgment about our failures, God looks on us with compassion and invites us to do the same.

No one was more astonished at the moment of her conversion than Sara Miles herself. I think I have mentioned this author to you before. She has written two books now, the first of which is the memoir of her conversion and her vision for launching The Food Pantry, a ministry that feeds over 12,000 families in San Francisco today. In her first book, *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion* she said this about the way that God caught her attention after many years of trying:

“One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans--except that up until that moment I'd led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything.....The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all, but actual food--indeed, the bread of life. ”

She goes on to describe how she felt herself (using my words now) feasting on the gifts of God in that moment of communion and how she wanted to translate that experience of feast into a tangible offering of food to people who didn’t have enough.

This was what happened to Sara Miles after God, the Constant Gardener, carefully tended the soil around the fig tree of her life for forty six years before she noticed it. It's not as if her life was a total waste up until that moment, it's just that her life opened up in new ways to some powerful forces....forces of compassion and forces for justice. God had been doing that work all along but now she got to join with God in that effort and it changed her life in ways she never imagined possible.

Interestingly she talks about God's work through her life in the very same terms as does the prophet Isaiah today. On the one hand quite literally putting food before people and inviting them to come buy and eat without money and without price. As she described her own experience of coming into the body of Christ you recognize the imagery of the feast is a way of describing the provisions God gives to us when we trust God with our life. The rich food Isaiah invites us to eat is the many gifts God places before us: mercy and compassion; invitation and welcome. The rich food upon which we are invited to feast is the wisdom of the Torah and the teaching of Jesus.

As Paul asserts in the reading from Corinthians today, we are more likely to look for the sustenance of God's gifts when we stay in touch with our vulnerability. If I believe that I have it all together, when I am sure that I am right and don't believe that I have anything to learn – that is when I am most in danger: “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you don't fall.”

Just this past week I was remembering and telling someone about the time when I first realized how counterproductive is to pretend that you have it all together. I was talking with my therapist at the time in my late twenties. I had been a pastor for a number of years already. She was pointing something out that I hadn't thought of before and I remember getting defensive and angry. And she very kindly observed: “Jill – I've noticed that when I offer support you often experience it as attack. Do you feel shame in being a student?” She didn't mean being a student in a classroom. She meant being in the posture of learning. And I remember thinking “Yes! That is exactly it....And how crazy is that.” What a relief to let that façade go.

The crux of this teaching from Paul and the real gift of the insight that came to me that day in therapy comes in the second part of verse 13: “God is faithful...” Because God is faithful it is not all up to us. Because God is faithful it is never too late for something or someone to change.

Maybe there is someone you love who seems to be wandering off in some dangerous directions and you’re tempted to throw in the towel.

Maybe you’ve lost track of the purpose of your faith and you wonder if God is throwing in the towel on you.

If there is anything you take from these texts today, take this: it is never too late for God’s grace to take hold. God is forever setting a feast of rich food before us. It is never too late to take those gifts in – to turn around, to change, or to try something totally new.

After all, you never know what one more season in the hands of a gifted gardener can bring.