

## *Return to the Lord*

*Isaiah 55:1-9*

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.  
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.  
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.  
I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.  
See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.  
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.  
Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.  
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.  
For my thoughts 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.

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### *Comments*

It is widely recognized that the Old Testament book of Isaiah has a complex history. Isaiah 55 is part of what is called "Second Isaiah" (chapters 40-66). "First Isaiah" (chapters 1-39) was composed during the life of Isaiah, son of Amoz, who prophesied in Judah during the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel (742-700 B.C.). The composer of Second Isaiah lived and prophesied almost exactly 200 years later during the exile after the Babylonian conquest of the southern kingdom of Judah and the destruction of Solomon's Temple (587 B.C.).

The anonymous composer of Second Isaiah honored the tradition of the prophet Isaiah by ascribing his compositions to his revered predecessor. His prophecies were probably addressed to both the exiles in Babylon and to the entire community of those who had left Israel and Judah and settled in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean.

The context of Isaiah 55 is the joyful anticipation of the restoration and return of the exiles to the land of Israel. The "return" motif in II Isaiah addresses the hope of

many of the dispersed that they may be able to return to Judah. But the prophet in this speech addresses the need to return to God, regardless of whether or not one may be able to return to the “homeland.” In fact, Isaiah’s appeal to his listeners is to turn from their preoccupation with survival and to turn to their only true source of life, the Lord, their God. **Now** is the time to seek and call upon God before it is too late. God’s word is present and powerful. God offers food and drink to the hungry and the thirsty **now!**

God is waiting to forgive and pardon the systemic sinfulness of the people. This was acted out in the policies and actions of the people prior to the exile. The wickedness included the impoverishment of the poor through the unequal distribution of wealth, the widespread practice of violence and bloodshed, and the persecution of those who were truly righteous. The “unrighteous” were those who despised or were indifferent to the word of God, gloried in gaining power over others, and were hypocritical in their maintenance of the appearance of religious devotion while practicing personal corruption. What is needed now in preparation for any physical return is radical repentance.

The good news of the prophet is that God is near and can be found if we seek and call upon our God. The promise of forgiveness and pardon is ever present if we return to the Lord in humility and contrition. This applies to all forms of addiction, destructive habits, and patterns of behavior that hurt others. This is true for us as individuals, as a nation, and as a global human community. This kind of repentance alone can save us from self-destruction.

This section of Isaiah concludes with the celebration of the power of God’s Word that will accomplish its purpose. That power is particularly present for those who write the Word of God on their hearts. The prophet invites us all to examine our conscience and our practices as individuals and as communities. Just as the Christian people of the South were not consciously aware of the evil of slavery on which their society was based prior to the Civil War, so also we are probably unaware of the injustices on which our personal and communal lives are based. This is true of all periods of human history and it is undoubtedly true of our period of history now. The promise of joy and fruitfulness for those who do repent ends this prophecy. It is an invitation to a new life full of hope and peace.

*Note from Tom:*

*Parts of this meditation are based on the comments of my professor at Union Theological Seminary, James Smart, in his book, History and Theology in II Isaiah*

## *Exercises*

Suggestions for discipleship formation this week...

- ❖ Read Isaiah 55:1-9 through out loud once, and then read Isaiah 55:6-7 several times. Here are the verses:

*Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.  
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.*

- ❖ Read Isaiah 55:6-7 out loud again, slowly, with a pause between each line. Now close your eyes. What word or phrase floats to awareness? Write the word or words in the box below.

Why do you think those words came to you?

- ❖ Notice the structure of these verses:
  - There are 3 sentences and 4 lines (the third sentence is divided); when you say them, drop your voice and take a deep breath at the end of each sentence. (Try it now.)
  - Each sentence is divided into phrases by a comma. Take a short pause for a breath at each comma. (Try it now.)
  - The order of thought in each line is:
    1. seek/found, call/near
    2. wicked/forsake way, unrighteous/thoughts
    3. return to the Lord/may have mercy
    4. our God/will abundantly pardon
- ❖ It may be helpful to imagine each of the verbs visually: seeking, calling, forsaking, and returning. The associations might be your experiences of these things or a memory of some element of the past.