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Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 55:1-13

55 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. ²Why 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. ³Incline 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. ⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵See, 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.

⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ⁷let 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. ⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. ¹²For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. ¹³Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Sermon: Instant and Ancient Light

Did you know that we live about 90 million miles away from the sun?

We live 90 million miles away from the source of heat and light that sustains all life on this planet. And indeed, we are very fortunate to be in that range, which scientists call the “circumstellar habitable zone,” that range of distance that is conducive to life, gravity, and water. If those big scientific words trip you up, you can also just call it the “Goldilocks Zone,” where the atmosphere is not too cold, and not too hot, but juuuuuust right. ¹

Our planet is nestled right in the Goldilocks Zone, 90 million miles from the sun. But how long does it take for the beams of light that stream through our lovely Tiffany windows to make that trip? The answer is about eight minutes.

Photons are the particles of energy that constitute light and they travel very, very fast – about 185,000 miles per second. If you could travel at the speed of light you could circle the planet 7.5 times in a second. Traveling at that speed, an ambitious little photon could travel from the surface of the sun to the surface of earth in about eight minutes. That means that if the sun were to suddenly extinguish, it would be about eight minutes before you wished you had your sweater.

The implications of this information are a little bit dizzying, especially once you consider the stars. The sun is much closer to us than the other stars. The next closest star is about 4 light-years away, meaning that the tiny pinpricks of light that we see in the sky are actually years old by the time they reach our eyes. What this functionally means is that the star that you are admiring is actually an image from the past – what the star looked like four years ago. To find out what a star looks like right now, you’ll have to wait at least four more years – and maybe thousands.

¹ This piece of information, and almost every other scientific fact in these first pages about the sun, come from an article called, “How Long Does It Take Sunlight To Reach The Earth,” by Fraser McCain, *The Astronomy Guide To Space*, www.universetoday.com.

Here is my favorite speculation from this line of thinking: We know that there are galaxies beyond Earth that are millions of light years away. The galaxy M109, for example, is located 83.5 million light years from earth. Conceivably, if there were aliens living in M109 who had really excellent telescopes, they might be able to take a look at our planet and see it as it looked millions of years ago – dinosaurs roaming the land and sky.

Herein is the paradox – the kind of thought that fills me with a sense of wonder. Light is both instant – it takes a nanosecond to travel from your phone to your eye - and also ancient. It shows us what is right in front of our face, even as it hints at histories and landscapes we can hardly imagine.

But its quite easy, isn't it, not to think about the light at all?

That tension between instant vision and ancient light strikes me as appropriate when navigating the prophecies of Isaiah.

The Book of Isaiah appears in our Bibles as a unified whole but it is actually a collection of writings by multiple authors over a span of time. Isaiah tells the story of the exile – the Israelite people's deportation from their home. It's a story in three movements – departure, exile, and return. Scholars tend to call these movements First, Second, and Third Isaiah. Our reading today falls at the conclusion of Second Isaiah, right at the moment when hope begins to return to the people. After the shock of defeat and years of exile, the people are daring to dream about the prospect of a homecoming.

Prophets like Isaiah tend to walk a narrative tightrope, balancing between *history* and *theology*. It is impossible to separate Isaiah from the geopolitics of the Ancient Near East. It is a historical fact that despite all of the bravado of the Scriptures, Judah was a small and insignificant power. Egypt posed constant threats from the South. To the north, there was a revolving door of military forces humiliating the Israelites. The Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians did not give much thought to the God of Israel. They just went about the brutal work of

empire, shuffling lesser powers like chess pieces on the board.² Multiple times, Judah's borders were violated, their city walls were breached, and their temple was destroyed.

In this sense, Isaiah is a historical account of these challenging times. The suffering, devastation, and confusion are all recorded and it is impossible to understand the text without understanding the history. Let's give the Scriptures some credit for authenticity. The suffering is not minimized or concealed.

But at the same time, it would be inaccurate to call Isaiah a history. The prophet is adamant about locating their history *inside* of their theology, interpreting each triumph and tragedy through the lens of God's enduring faithfulness.

It is as though the text offers two sensory experiences, two different kinds of light. The first light is concrete, visceral, and immediate. We could call it the experience of empirical evidence. We see, smell, touch, and hear right now. It's a real mixed bag, if we are honest. There is beauty to be sure, but there is no denying the pain, the failure, the doubt, the anger. How does one worship a loving, all-powerful God as the temple is being dismantled brick by brick? This was a question on the lips of every Israelite, and it is not an unfamiliar question to those of us in the contemporary church, Amen?

But there is a second kind of light in Isaiah. Unlike the first, it is expansive, mysterious, and hopeful. The fancy theological term here is exilic hope – the faith that soldiers on from a place of despair. Such a hope is not rooted in the world as it is – though it lives there. Such hope is rooted in God's covenant love.

“Listen carefully to me,” says the Lord. “Incline your ear, and come to me; I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.”

² Bruce C. Birch, et al. *A Theological Introduction To The Old Testament*, Abington Press, Nashville, pg. 364.

To me, it's kind of insane to invoke this everlasting covenant with David *from exile*. See, some three hundred years earlier God made promises to David, the new king, invoking a kingdom that would last forever. 2 Samuel 7, verse 16: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me, your throne established forever."

The Babylonian invasion, the destruction of the temple – it seems like an explicit repudiation of those promises. And yet here is Isaiah, saying, "Don't forget my covenant with David. It was true for David. It is true for you."

From the perspective of the first light it makes no sense at all. If anything, it's just dumb bluster, the worst kind of whistling in the dark.

From the second light, though, it speaks of a faith that is much deeper and wider than we can get our heads around. Which is precisely what Isaiah goes on to say:

⁸My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

It's almost as though the prophet is saying – "That light by which you see the world – the world which fills you with fear, anger, despair – that very light is a miracle. That very light tells a story much longer and more amazing than you could currently imagine."

Is it so crazy, in the end, to think that we, the people who depend on a star 90 million miles away for our very life, might not fully comprehend the love that God has for us?

It's notable to me that while our ancestors had a much more limited scientific understanding of the natural world, it led them to very similar places of wonder, situated at the edges of their comprehension.

When explaining the slow and steady persistence of God's faithfulness, Isaiah invokes the weather. "Just as rain and snow fall from heaven and

do not return until they have watered the earth,” says the prophet, “so the word of God, spoken from my mouth, will not return empty but will accomplish its purpose.”

It’s almost as if he is saying, “Do you understand the miracle of the water cycle? Do you understand why the seeds you plant in the soil emerge over time as the food you eat? Of course you don’t. We are so enamored with the illusion of control but we rely daily on miracles we barely understand. Do you trust that once again the rain will fall and the crops will grow? You do. Such is the world and such is the life of faith.

Such a faith statement is a far cry from any kind of smug formula. It’s a faith that lives on the boundaries of our understanding. And how, really, could a people in exile have anything else?

We practice our faith in the circumstellar habitable zone where belief and doubt, action and apathy exist in delicate, holy balance.

This week, Virginia McLaurin got an audience with Barack and Michelle Obama at the White House. The 106 year-old African American woman literally danced out of her chair and into the President’s arms. “It’s an honor, it’s an honor,” she cried out. When she ran across the room to greet the First Lady, President Obama said, “Slow down now, don’t go to quick,” but there was no stopping her. “I never thought I would live to get into the White House,” said Virginia. “And I tell you, I am so happy – a black President and a black wife. I’m here to celebrate Black history. That’s what I’m here for.”³

In a 2014 YouTube video that Virginia posted online, she told the President that she would pray for him every day of her life. That’s a woman who was born in 1909. That’s a woman who knows something about holding hope in exile.

³ “Woman, 106, dances with joy at meeting the Obamas.”
<http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/22/politics/virginia-mclaurin-obama-meeting-video/>

See, there is a powerful link between *hope* and *justice*. There is the tension zone where the problems of the world are crushing but not so crushing as to rob us of the vision of what might be possible. That is the Goldilocks zone where our hearts are awakened to what God is doing right now.

In an essay on today's passage, Walter Brueggemann points out that what is being offered to us by Isaiah is a political and economic choice.⁴

A contemporary of Isaiah would immediately recognize that he is doing his best impersonation – not of a street preacher, but of a market vendor. I think of the vendors who roam Camden Yards. “Peanuts! Get your peanuts!” Instead, Isaiah is crying out: “Hey! Are you thirsty? Come have some water! You who have no money – come, buy, and eat. Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread and your labor on that which does not satisfy?”

It's a provocative image – a market vendor offering free food and drink while critiquing the rest of the market. The most dangerous consequence of despair, warns Brueggeman, is that we begin to play by the rules of the empire. We loosen our grip on the dreams that animated our faith and begin to make the cynical choices of the marketplace. The reality is that not every Israelite had suffered for years as slaves in Babylon. Some of them had gotten a little comfortable.

Why are you eating what doesn't satisfy, cries the prophet? Why are you working so hard for things that don't matter?

That is a potent question to ask ourselves as the season of Lent converges with a Presidential Election Cycle. As we prepare our hearts and lives for the one who modeled a suffering, sacrificial love, we watch our national politics devolve into a pandering, self-serving circus.

⁴ Walter Brueggeman, “A Covenant of Neighborly Justice: Break The Chains of Quid Pro Quo.” www.onscripture.com. February 28, 2016.

How we respond in this moment is of great significance.

There is a powerful link between *hope* and *justice*. And our faith, while not distinct from our history, has the power to move us forward through our history.

It is our very hope for a better future that makes us angry. It is our hope for a just and equitable Baltimore that propels us into the streets to register new voters and refuse to settle for the status quo. It's because we refuse to accept that what we see right now is as good as it gets.

When I see Christian leaders rushing to endorse political candidates whose agenda and demeanor are antithetical to the witness of Jesus Christ, I see a capitulation from hope to the logic of empire.

When I hear voices inside and outside of me suggesting that it doesn't matter which candidate is elected mayor of Baltimore City because they are all the same – I see a capitulation from hope to the logic of empire.

We forget that we worship a God who plays the long game. A God whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts. A God who said thousands of years ago through the prophet Jeremiah:

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, plans to give you hope and a future.”

See that's a promise but it's not an escape hatch. It's a call to action. We are called to be the animating edge of God's in-breaking hope. We carry that hope through difficult times because we have been gifted with a prophetic imagination that dreams much bigger than the world in front of our noses.

Virginia McLaurin was born in 1909 on a South Carolina farm. Her parents were sharecroppers who didn't own their land and never expected to do so. They were living in the Jim Crow South during the wicked decades of post-reconstruction.

Her family moved to Washington, D.C. in 1941, when Virginia was 32. That means she was there and fully able to comprehend emerging leaders like A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, who were working to desegregate the military and provide more economic opportunities for African Americans.

She lived in Washington, D.C. during 1963 March on Washington and everything that came after.

Then she lived for 53 more years in order to have her audience with the President.

Marian Wright Edelman, the President of the Children's Defense Fund, wrote an article this week saying that she believes that we are currently in another post-Reconstruction era – a vicious, regressive backlash that feels scary and consuming. That is the immediate light in which we live.⁵ But Edelman argues that we are also on the cusp of a Third Reconstruction – an era of progress and civil rights that is bubbling up from our young people.

The light of the present moment is a real mixed bag. But the life of Virginia McLaurin is a welcome reminder of a much more ancient light. It's a reminder that the tide of history is turning. It's a call to action to labor for things that satisfy. God's word will not return empty.

Somehow, Virginia knew that, as a child, staring up at the South Carolina stars. Somehow she knew she was looking at the past, even as she lived in the present. Somehow she knew and believed that the promise of God's future - full of hope - is still being written.

⁵ Marian Wright Edelman. "The Third Reconstruction Era," the Huffington Post, February 26, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/the-third-reconstruction_b_9332110.html