

Hespeler, 24 March, 2019 © Scott McAndless – 3<sup>rd</sup> Lent  
Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

**H**o, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have money, come, buy and drink. Come, buy and drink.

There is a well, not all that far from here from which a certain company pumps 3.6 million litres of ground water every day. This is a fact that upsets a few people because it is such a large amount of water from a water table that we all depend on and maybe mostly because they don't pay anything for that privilege. Well, that is not quite right. They actually pay something – a little over \$13 a day. But, considering that they then put that water in bottles that they can sell for a dollar each or more – a markup that is so huge that I couldn't even figure out how to calculate it – you might say they pay close to nothing.

And I realize that the whole Nestlé Aberfoyle Bottling Plant water contract thing can be a bit of a controversial topic in these parts. And I don't mean to get into the whole political controversy around it. I mention it, simply to name it as one of the controversial issues of our time.

The fact of the matter is, whether we like it or not, whether we are more concerned for the job creation aspect or the environmental health aspect, it is an issue that's simply not going to go away. We are living in a world where some of the basic things of life, things like water, have become and are becoming commodities and not merely services. And there is a lot of money and jobs and investments on the line as we deal with the question of the commodification of these things. These are issues we simply cannot escape.

And it is strange. In fact, there are times when I just don't recognize it. I mean, this is not the world that I grew up in. This is not the world that I was promised. When I was small, the notion that someone would buy a bottle of water, much less that some corporation would build a billion-dollar enterprise on the sale of water, was simply laughable. Water was a service, not a commodity. That would never change especially in a place like Canada with abundant water resources. And yet here we are. Sometimes I feel as if I'm living as a stranger in a strange land.

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have money, come, buy and drink. Come, buy and drink.*

The prophet had heard that song everyday of his life for decades now. He was living in the city of Babylon, but he was not a Babylonian. He was a Judean, a foreigner, who had been brought there many years before by a hostile invading Babylonian army that had destroyed his land. And in Babylon, they had these water sellers. Early in the morning they



would walk the streets with their song: *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have money, come, buy and drink. Come, buy and drink.*

And the Judeans had no choice. They didn't own access to wells or streams. Since no one could live without water, they had to buy from the water sellers. This was not the world that the prophet had grown up in. In Judah the people had possessed the land that God had given them. They dug their own wells and built their cisterns or shared them in their communities. Never, back then, could they have imagined that the song of the water seller would be a part of their lives. It was as unthinkable to them as, well, the idea of buying plastic water bottles once was to us. It was simply laughable. It would never happen. And yet here they were, living as strangers in a strange land.

That is the situation that the prophet is speaking to in our reading this morning from the Book of Isaiah. This passage was almost certainly addressed to Judeans who were living in exile. In fact, they had been living there so long that they had gotten used to a lot of things – things like the calls of the Babylonian water sellers. They had gotten so used to it that, while they were nostalgic for the lost past, they could not see a way forward.

And the prophet was given the task of proclaiming the word of the LORD to the people who were living through all of that. And that word, amazingly, was that God was about to do something new. There was no way to go back to how things were before exile; that way of life was over. But God was about to take his people in exile back to the land where they had once lived so they could make a *new* beginning.

We don't know what the name of this prophet was; he was just the man who took up the words of the original Prophet Isaiah from over a century before and interpreted them for the new situation in Babylon. But I think that in many ways he is the biblical prophet we need most to hear today. I think we have an awful lot in common with the people that he was preaching to. We, like them, often feel as if we are living as strangers in a strange land.

And I'm not just talking about the strangeness of finding ourselves living in a world where water has become a commodity and a part of a corporate business plan. There seems to be so much that we find so strange about the world today. We are living in a multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural country of Canada today that I am sure many of us never imagined when we were younger. We are living in a world where we are being forced, many of us, to think of our relationship with Canada's indigenous people in strange new ways. We are living in a strange, constantly connected world of social media.

And maybe especially the Christian church finds itself living in a strange new world. Thirty years or so ago, the church had a place of honour in society – why society even reserved one day a week to the almost exclusive use of the church. But today that is almost all gone, and it often feels like the church is living in a society that is sometimes even hostile to its existence.

We do often feel like exiles living in a strange land. And, like those exiles in Babylon, we know somewhere deep inside that there is no going back to the

world that used to be. But that doesn't stop us from looking back with nostalgia and pining for that lost world. God sent the prophet to those Judeans in exile in Babylon to break them out of that attitude. He didn't want them to live in their memories of the past, but he also didn't want them to just become complacent where they were now. He had to break them out of both of those things because God was about to do something completely new. So how did the prophet do that?

Well, one day he went out in the streets of the exile community and he imitated the cry of the Babylonian water sellers: **“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 labour for that which does not satisfy?”** (And I'm sure that he sang it much better than that but that is probably what he did – he sang it.)

What was he doing? He was taking the familiar song of the water sellers that reminded the people everyday that they were living as exiles in a strange land, and he was changing it. He was jarring them with an unexpected twist of the familiar. Pay without money? Buy without price? Spend instead on something that is not a commodity? That wasn't how the world worked! It still isn't how the world works? You are kind of forced into looking at everything from an entirely new point of view.

It makes me wonder, what might the prophet do if he were among us today? I think that he would recognize us as fellow exiles – fellow strangers living in a strange land. He would recognize the tendency that we have to look back at the past with nostalgia and see everything in that past with rosy coloured glasses. He would recognize the complacency with which we look at where we are right now and how we don't necessarily want to risk change or anything new. He would recognize us as people who are caught between a lost past and an uncomfortable present. Those were the people he was talking to in exile in Babylon and I really think that we would seem familiar to him.

He might even recognize what all of that leads to at its worst. Some people who can't let go of that idealized image of the past – who think it must have been always good when for example, white men ruled unchallenged – will try and take us back there sometimes by the most despicable means. They will target and scapegoat immigrants and racial minorities, blaming them for all the problems they see in the world. They will imprison children and separate them from their parents for what is technically a misdemeanour in crossing a border without proper documentation. At the very worst, they will run, guns blazing, into mosques or synagogues. These things are all things that people who are troubled do because they feel like they no longer recognize the world that they are living in. Fortunately, the vast majority do not respond to such extremes, but the fact that a few do should give us pause.

What would the prophet do for us? I suspect he would shake us up – maybe take something familiar to us, something that reminds us that we are caught

living in this world where we don't quite feel at home. He wouldn't use the ancient water seller's song, of course, because that doesn't mean anything to us. But he might do something like impersonate the Fiji water girl at the Golden Globes. But the point would not be to merely mock what's happening in our world today. The internet is full of people mocking what's happening in the world today. He would be doing it in order to challenge our lack of imagination. You see, we are falling into this rut where all we can see is the world that used to be, which we look back on with nostalgia and not necessarily a whole lot of accuracy – we see that and the flaws of the present world. But we can't imagine the world that needs to be – the world that God is calling into existence. That is what the prophet was really doing for the people who were stuck in Babylon. That is what God would like to do for us.

**“Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.”** That is what he would challenge us to do. He's throwing out before us the radical idea that God is actually doing something in the world today and that, if we are ready to respond, we can be part of it. I know that we have fallen into thinking that God being active in the world is something that only happened in ancient times, a time before this exile in which we find ourselves, but that is a lie and we cannot accept it.

Even more, the prophet challenges us with these words, **“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.”** He is saying that we think too small. Our ideas are limited by what we may have known in the past, before we entered this strange land of exile, and our ideas are constrained by the realities that we find ourselves living in today. God's ideas and thoughts are not limited like that and God does not want our ideas to be limited either.

God is calling us onwards towards the new thing, the new creation and the new possibilities. But we have a hard time dealing with that because of where we are. God is sending us messages of possibility, wants us to dream big and to be bold enough to trust him for the big things. That was what the prophet was trying to do and he was successful. He persuaded many of the exiles in Babylon to step out and risk everything to build a brand new future. Now if only we would be so faithful.