

... call upon him while he is near

Isaiah 55:1–9

Psalm 63:1–8

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

Luke 13:1–9

Text: Isaiah 55:6-7

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.

Introduction

I often wonder why ‘identity’ has become such a pressing issue in our culture. I don’t recall it being that way when I was young. Professor Mary Eberstadt, in her article [*Men Are At War With God*](#) wrote, “Awakened from agnostic slumber by new forms of temptation, chiefly the sexual revolution, humanity is at war with God over a question that reaches back to the beginning of time: Who, exactly, should have power over creation?” Eberstadt details what she sees as the negative impact of this revolution on family, church, and community life—the very institutions, I realize, that informed me about the nature of my existence as I was growing up. Is it possible that the pressing issue of identity in our culture arises from the fraying or losses of these institutions? Eberstadt encourages Christians to stand firm in our conviction that people “are created in the image of God and for a purpose, or we subject ourselves and all who come after us to perpetual self-invention and its miseries.”

1. At the bottom of all these conversations about issues facing our society is a conviction about the nature of human existence. At one time, culturally speaking, there was broad consensus that humans are God’s creation. This is no longer the case. Our world’s current self-understanding arises out of other convictions about human existence. The gospel claims to be the true story of the world and our place in it. I know that in announcing this it is often rejected by a culture that only knows ‘your’ truth and ‘my’ truth. I simply raise the question here and ask, is it possible that the identity anguish so many experience arises out of current cultural convictions about our existence? In short, is it time to consider (or re-consider) another narrative about my existence?

The gospel also claims that Jesus is God speaking to us—the narrative of the Bible assumes that God is addressing each of us. And in that address we hear God’s declaration of the very nature of our existence. For instance, that God addresses us humans assumes that God created humans able to hear and respond to that address—such is the nature of our existence, according to the gospel. Can people today suspend their judgement of what they think Christians believe long enough to entertain the idea that they are being addressed by God?

In our reading from Isaiah we are told that we hear God’s address. Even though written centuries ago the address indicates that God knows we humans feel unsettled about our lives. “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.” There is an unsatisfied thirst or hunger we crave. If you are calling your child to come to you, the assumption is that your child

is at some distance away from you. When God calls us to come an assumption is made that we humans are distanced from God. There is a gap that needs to be closed. A change in direction required. And because God is inviting us to come, God has also made it possible to come to him.

There is something else in this invitation that is important to note. It is much more than an invitation. The thrice repeated word ‘come’ is in the imperative mood meaning that this is a command. “Come to the waters.” God declares that there are certain waters, waters whose nature quenches the true thirst of the human heart, that are found only in him. To the modern person hungry for identity, God says, “come buy and eat.” Jesus once said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) Jesus also used the imperative voice when he said “Come to me.” Yes, there is an inviting tone in God’s voice but there is an insistence that we must be careful to also note in what God says to us.

If you discover your young child is playing in the middle of the street and you say ‘come’, your tone of voice is likely much more insistent than if you are playing a game of hide and seek in your backyard. God’s insistence in his call to ‘come’ arises from his great love for us and our well-being. God does not regard our plight as a backyard game.

The Biblical narrative, that God is addressing us, implies that we can hear his address. God’s word through Isaiah continues, “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.” The question is, how will we respond to God’s address? The writer of Isaiah knows that God’s address demands a response. It is important to note that indifference or indecision are equally responses. And so the writer, in a comment to listeners applying the implication of God’s address, interjects a word of encouragement to respond. “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.”

“Call upon him while he is near.” The gospel writer Mark tells us that Jesus proclaimed the good news of God summarized this way, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’ The kingdom of God has come near. This is the same as saying the king of that kingdom has come near—namely Jesus himself. The implication of this good news is that Jesus is near and calling each of us to the same response, ‘repent, and believe in the good news.’

There are many experiences of life that can send our sense of who we are into a tailspin. Loss of employment, diagnosis of a deadly disease, divorce, pandemic isolation, strained family relationships, and bereavement, just to name a few. I can tell you what many know, to lose the one dearest to you in life, the person that your life revolved around in so many ways; that loss means having to learn a new pattern of life, deciding who you are going to be. This I know about relationship with Jesus Christ; he is ever the same and always with me. He knows my name, and more than that, he knows fully who I am and purposes to bring the person he created me to be into that great future he has secured for any who would believe in him through his life, death, and resurrection to life. Call upon him while he is near.

2. In that section where the writer of Isaiah turns to us speaking of the implications of God’s address he writes, “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.” Note that Isaiah says, ‘return to the Lord.’ Scholars believe that this message was preached to the Jewish exiles in Babylon calling on them to return to Jerusalem. My point to you is that this is a word addressed to the Lord’s people.

The theme of repentance runs through today’s scripture readings. Here in Isaiah people are called to turn from patterns of life that lead away from God. The word repentance that Jesus proclaimed means to turn around; turn from the road that leads away from God and turn to the road he has made that leads to him. Call on him while he is near. Instead of a posture turned away from him turn to him. Have you ever tried to get the attention of a grandchild who is glued to one of their electronic devices (or husband or wife for that matter)? You come and stand near them hoping they will see you. And you only get their attention when you pull the electronic device from their hands. I wonder if God has to do this with me?

In our gospel reading today Jesus was asked a question about an event that had dominated the news; Pilate had ordered the killing of some Galileans while they were at worship in the Temple. The assumption of many then, as it is today, is that people get what they deserve. They must have been worse sinners. Poverty is a result of poor decisions. Health problems the result of unhealthy life choices. Jesus, when asked about bad things happening to others, tells people to look to themselves. Everyone needs to repent.

In our Epistle reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians the Apostle identifies a number of instances from the story of Israel during their wilderness wanderings when the people turned from God to sinful things as examples so ‘we might not desire evil as they did.’ He cautions believers in light of this propensity towards evil, “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”

We may bristle at Paul’s characterization that we are prone to evil, as a little over the top. I may slip up now and then, but evil? That is what really bad people do. Recall what Jesus said to his disciples one day, “if you, evil as you are...; and he said this so matter-of-factly that it was one of those obvious kinds of things that goes without saying. Jesus also said that it is out of the human heart that evil intentions come.

I invite you to note that the Christian life is a life of continuous repentance. A life of constant turning to Jesus. Yes, there is that initial repentance of turning to Jesus, that time when we first believed and made our profession of faith. For some believers this occurred as a sudden event like being awakened by an alarm clock; with a jolt you were fully awake and your feet hit the floor. For others it was a slow awakening; perhaps you have the sound on the alarm clock turned low or you hit the snooze button a few times for just a little more sleep. However you were awakened to faith, the believer finds that each day requires a renewal or reminder of that commitment of repentance. In this day I will turn to Jesus and follow him. Apostles and prophets imply as much when it is said, ‘call upon him while he is near.’

In this Church season Christians call lent believers are reminded to consider their lives; is there something in my life to take up of to lay aside? Following Jesus’ saying about the necessity for all to repent, Luke records a parable Jesus told about a barren fig tree. The man who owned the

vineyard where he had planted the tree wanted to cut it down because it wasn't bearing any fruit. The gardener asked to give it one more year before cutting it down. You will notice that the parable ends without resolution—was the tree cut down or not? I believe that Luke includes this parable here to underscore Jesus' teaching about the necessity for repentance. For Luke, the life of faith involves both a break from sin and a production of fruit, that is life lived in obedience to the will of God. The Apostle Paul teaches the same. The good news of God he was set apart to proclaim was to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles. Clearly this is what Paul has in mind as he warns the Corinthians about idolatrous patterns of life.

Idolatry is to put anything in the place that God rightfully should occupy in our lives. It is to make a god out of things that are not God. Consider how our culture has made human sexuality a god; one of the manifestations is an ideology infecting institutions at every level that considers sexual preference the fundamental characteristic defining each person. We are not the first society to be obsessed in this way; it was this way in Corinth such that Paul particularly notes that believers are not to indulge in sexual immorality; a word that needs to be heard today.

I love the question God asks us through the prophet Isaiah. "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?" Remember Jesus' citation from Deuteronomy in the face of temptation; "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus also said, 'you cannot serve God and wealth.' Consider how things take over more and more of our lives; yesterday's luxuries have become today's necessities. The march of technology ever demands the latest devices. Making wealth a god traps us into that false allure of acquisition—if I just have that newer, bigger, latest, I will finally be satisfied. This is to spend money on that which is not bread and your labour on that which does not satisfy, according to God.

Do you ever wonder why Paul has to warn Christians about idolatry? Aren't believers the people who have the God who has revealed God's self in Jesus of Nazareth as their God? It is apparent that believers, even though they have been set free from sin by Christ need constant vigilance to keep God on the throne of our lives. Repentance is ever turning to him. This admonition from Isaiah to 'call upon him while he is near' expands into the believers life in an all encompassing way. It isn't just a word calling people to come to faith; it is a word describing the nature of faith. Faith is a relationship that is engaged in daily.

The insidious thing about idolatry is that we can make idols of good things. Family is a penultimate good God has given us; but family will not save us. Nature is a wonderful gift of God certainly to be enjoyed; but it is not God. How easy it is to let these sorts of good things God has given for our benefit crowd out of our lives commitment to the public worship of God with his people.

But Paul assures us that God is faithful and he will not let us be tested beyond our strength, but with the testing also provide a way out so that we may be able to endure it. I invite you to hear this word from Paul as a practical application of God's word through Isaiah—call upon him while he is near.

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