

Come to the table (Isaiah 55:1-9)

Isaiah comes to the rescue with a word of the Lord.

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We do not know for sure what audience Isaiah had in mind with these stirring words of invitation, how close his first hearers stood either to the destruction of Jerusalem in around 586 BCE or to the return to the promised land from Babylonian captivity some 50 years later. But certainly, from the vantage of exile, they knew a great deal about hunger and thirst. No better way, then, to imagine God's future redemption than for the prophet essentially to cry out on the Lord's behalf, "Free food!"

The lack of food and water had been, of course, a major issue when starvation loomed large during the Exodus—but there is no scriptural report of anyone starving during the desert trek. Indeed, the provision of daily sustenance was among the major signs and wonders of divine providence. God "opened the doors of heaven," says the psalmist, and gave the Israelites "the bread of angels" (78:23-25). Or as Paul has it in our second reading, our ancestors in the faith "all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink." They were taken care of, therefore, and in more ways than one. They had food and they had God, too.

It turns out, however, that the "grain of heaven" was not to the taste of mortals. They longed instead for what they had enjoyed even when they were Pharaoh's slaves. Forgetting their slave labor, they missed what they once had for dinner: "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leaks, the onions" (Num. 11:5).

Dietary nostalgia won the day. Deliverance from captivity was one thing, the divine menu on the Red Sea's other shore quite another. God's diet kept them alive but without the pleasure of taste: "now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Num. 11:5-6). What was the problem with the fare? Another account makes it seem appealing. In Exodus 16:31 we are told that "the taste of it was like wafers made with honey." Still, it was not to the people's taste.

This pushback on food had dire consequences. Bored with manna, constantly demanding meat, the Israelites were finally given an answer to their prayers that turned out to be a month-long nightmare. They got what they craved with an inundation of quail, "but while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed . . . the LORD struck the people with a very great plague" (Num. 11:33). Or as Paul tells the Corinthians without the gory details, "God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness."

What then shall we say to this? For me, Isaiah comes to the rescue with a word of the Lord that takes us beyond the scripture's story of crime and punishment, beyond the petulant Israelites and a God with a temper. Instead, the prophet poses questions that slow me down and cut to the quick. He also gives commands I want to follow: "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."

Why spend effort and labor and money on "that which does not satisfy," which leaves you hungry and thirsty? If your ears are truly open, why not attend with care to what you hear? And then consider what is on offer. The invitation, after all, is to delight in food to be had "without money and without price"—"rich food" to boot! The meal is free for the taking and the table set with a purpose, "so that you may live." Why would anyone stay home?

Ho, everyone, come.