

GOD IS FAITHFUL
1 CORINTHIANS 10: 1-13; ISAIAH 55: 1-8
THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
MARCH 7, 2010

Isaiah 55: 1-8

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. For 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.

Seek ye the Lord. God offers us an everlasting covenant of love in Jesus Christ. God's love is free. Our Lord is merciful. Yet for some reason, or a multitude of reasons, we turn elsewhere for what we imagine to be the good life. Lent is a time to take stock of our spiritual well-being. Lent is a time to seek the Lord and listen. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, but God is faithful. One of the ways we listen to God is through the scriptures.

Evidently the Apostle Paul believed the Corinthian Christians needed to examine their lives in light of the scriptures. Most of the congregants at Corinth were Gentiles. They lived in a town known for its sophistication, but Corinth was also known for its immorality and hedonistic lifestyle. Paul warned the Corinthians to examine their lives before they came for communion. In his letters Paul specifically addressed some of their sins, including sins of adultery, greed, pride, impatience, complacency and selfishness, to name a few.

Some of the Corinthians considered the Hebrew scriptures to be irrelevant. All they needed to do was believe in Christ, right? What difference did it make if they ate the food sacrificed to idols and joined in a party? Eating meat was a treat. The donor offering sacrifices usually provided wine and other delicacies. As long as they did not believe in idols, what was the harm if they enjoyed a good meal and a few drinks?

Paul's response takes me back to times when my son was invited to trips over spring break or when he went to Dallas for the Texas-OU weekend. It was not John's beliefs and behavior that worried me as much as the behavior of others who would be around him. The company we keep, whether at parties, on television or on the internet makes a difference. On the news in Corpus Christi, a police spokesperson said they expect to make over 1000 DUI arrests during spring break.

Paul warned the Corinthians to think about the example they were providing to others. Some people might handle the nuances of eating meat sacrificed to Roman gods, but what if it led people to stumble in their faith? What if the wine and parties enticed people to commit sin?

The Session of this church followed Paul's advice when we decided not to serve wine for communion. Presbyterians have no problem with moderate social drinking or serving wine during communion, but our

session did not want to be the cause of someone stumbling. Our Session does not allow alcohol to be served in the church, for communion or for any other event held here.

In our reading for this morning, Paul goes deeper into his discussion of stumbling. This time he says it is the Corinthians themselves who need to be careful. According to Paul, they could fall into sin any time. Typical of Jewish rabbis in those days, Paul drew analogies between the exodus experience of the Hebrews and the life of the Corinthians. Paul believed the scriptures teach us about our sin and about God's faithfulness.

Like the Jews long ago, Christians are sinners. According to Paul, we may be washed clean in our baptisms, but we continue to sin. We are guilty of immorality and idolatry. We are impatient. We put God to the test, and we complain. Paul warned the Corinthians not to be smug about their righteousness. Listen to Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13. It might keep us from falling.

1 Corinthians 10: 1-13

10 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. 6 Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. 7 Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." 8 We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. 9 We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. 10 And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 11 These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. 12 So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. 13 No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Thanks be to God for the reading of this Word. Please pray with me. Lord of all ages, we give thanks for your Word, especially your Living Word in Jesus Christ. Teach us through the Word read and proclaimed so that we learn your will for our lives and discover the abundant life you offer us. Forgive us when we are smug about our righteousness, Lord. Keep us on guard against the temptations that come to all of us. By the power of your Spirit, encourage us to seek the Lord where we are and receive forgiveness and direction. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Paul is clever in the ways he makes analogies between the life experience of the Hebrews and the Corinthians. According to Paul, passing through the sea was analogous to Christian baptism. Manna from heaven and water from a rock were spiritual foods, not unlike Christian communion. The sins of the Hebrews in the wilderness, Paul warned, were the same temptations the Corinthians faced in their own time and place.

The Jews in the wilderness made an idol. They threw a wild party when Moses was gone longer than they expected. They were impatient. They wanted to feel good. Self gratification can easily become an idol, particularly in our society today.

Instead of thanking God for the blessings they received, the Hebrews complained and grumbled. Blaming God when we face difficulty is a common temptation. According to the scriptures, the Hebrews refused to obey God. They failed to trust God. The Hebrews gave into temptation in the wilderness. As a result, many of them never made it into the Promised Land.

Paul warned the Christians at Corinth, and Paul warns us to be on guard. The Corinthians were treading on a dangerously thin surface of pride and over-confidence (Suzanne Mayor, Lectionary Homiletics, March 11, 2007, 52). They were playing games with the wisdom of their age. Perhaps we are, too. Lent is a time to be on guard.

If we are not careful sin will seduce us because it wears a mask of virtue. (Homiletics March 7, 2010, 12). According to the wisdom popular in our day, immorality and adultery are simply ways to find the love we need. During a preview of the Barbara Walters interviews which air tonight, one actress said that adultery would make no difference in her marriage. As long as she and her husband keep no secrets, she said sexual encounters outside the marriage would be no problem.

Our society has many ways to rationalize what we want do, even if what we do is sinful. Rather than living a greedy lifestyle, we are pursuing the American dream. We do not act unethically; we follow the laws of the marketplace. Physical abuse is discipline, and drunkenness is having a good time.

We face temptations. We sin, like the Hebrews long ago. Our historical circumstances are different, but the sins of immorality, ingratitude, impatience, selfishness, indifference, disobedience and lack of trust are common to us all. If we are not careful, we will stumble or fall. The consequences can be devastating.

Similarly to Paul, we might make a few analogies ourselves. When are people most likely to stumble or fall? Jo Ann Long tumbled at the Presbytery meeting this weekend. She was searching through boxes of books and caught her heel. Jo Ann was focused on treasures for our library, not the dangers of falling.

Travel writer Jan Morris has scars all over her body because of falling (Homiletics, March 11, 2007, 21). Like Jo Ann, sometimes Jan fell because she was distracted, perhaps reading a tour guide while she walked along a street. Jan stubbed her toe on a block of ice on Mt Everest because she was entranced by the beauty of her surroundings. If we are going to fall, Jan recommends that we fall in a good place. Once she fell into a horse drawn carriage in New York. She said it was very romantic. Jo Ann fell onto a man who tried to catch her. Romantic was not the way Jo Ann described her experience.

A scientific study of falling conducted in Japan determined that our posture, our gait, the movement of our feet, and the position of our toes make a difference (Homiletics, March 11, 2007, 22). The elevation of the toes by a fraction of an inch dramatically reduced the likelihood of falling. Although distractions may lead to a fall, so do our basic habits.

If we choose to make the analogy, we might avoid spiritual falling the same way we avoid physical falling. We need to watch where we are going. Like the Corinthians, we need to be careful about the company we keep. Hang out with the wrong crowd and it will rub off on us – whether it is at work, at school or anywhere else. We are what we watch and what we do. If we get distracted or choose to spend our time on dangerous spiritual terrain, either we will fall or we may cause someone else to fall.

Several years ago a man told me that his work got in the way of his parenting, his marriage and his commitment to God. Even when he came home, he always had work on his mind. Instead of playing with his kids or listening to his wife, he thought about the next project, a report that was due or a

conference call coming up. Working hard started out as a good thing, but it became an idol. He did not intend to sin. He did nothing criminally wrong; but he said he failed as a husband, as a father and as a Christian. He was distracted by work, and he fell. It almost cost him his family, but he turned to God and so did his wife. Their marriage is stronger than ever. Is there something distracting us right now?

There are habits we can establish to guard us against falling into sin. One habit is reading and studying the Word. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Temptation strips all of us of any power save the power of God’s Word” (Lectionary Homiletics, March 11, 2007, 53). We are instructed and encouraged by the scriptures. Jesus quoted scriptures in his response to Satan in the wilderness, and so can we when we are tempted. Reading, studying and listening to the Word will carry us through the tough times. Sometimes we may need to read the Psalms until we hear the message God has for us.

Prayer is also a constant source of strength and guidance, as is the encouragement and accountability we find within a faith community. How sad it is when people quit coming to church because they stumbled into sin, into their own sin or into the sin of others. We are all sinners saved by the grace of God. We travel to the Promised Land together. We are here to help each other up when we stumble.

The Holy Spirit inspires us through scriptures and prayer. The Spirit also brings thoughts into our mind. Often we have a gut-sense that we are considering something that is wrong, although sometimes our gut feeling may not be from God (Homiletics March 7, 2010 p. 11). You may have heard the tale of the woman who accidentally drove past a bakery on the first day of a new diet (Homiletics, March 7, 2010, 11). “Lord,” she prayed. “It’s up to you. If you want me to have any of those delicious goodies, create a parking place directly in front of the bakery.” Sure enough, on the eighth time around the block, there it was.

On a more serious note, Dr. Eells Nelson, who now lives at the Estrella, wrote a book titled Don’t Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide. “I have come to believe,” Nelson wrote, “that the power of culture to shape beliefs and dictate moral behavior is so strong that only a revelation from God is capable of breaking through to give individuals a new lease on life” (Nelson, 4-5).

The Spirit breaks through our consciousness. The Spirit brings to mind the pain from past mistakes. By the power of the Spirit, we consider potential consequences, realize our vulnerability and ask for help. At its core, much of what we call sin is self-destructive behavior.

God sent Christ into the world to bring life. The Good News is that God’s love in Jesus Christ is stronger than temptation and sin. God is faithful even if we are not. As the Prophet Isaiah told the Israelites, the Lord is near. God is merciful and offers forgiveness. God’s grace empowers us if we listen. In fact, Ann Weems (Kneeling in Jerusalem, 33) describes Lent as “A Listening”:

Going through Lent is a listening. When we listen to the word, we hear where we are so blatantly unliving. If we listen to the word, and hallow it into our lives, we hear how we can so abundantly live again.

My friends in Christ, God is faithful. May we listen carefully to God’s Word during Lent and discover abundant life in Christ.