

March 23, 2025
Isaiah 55:1-9

Lent 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Come to the Waters”

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters ...”

My favourite summertime destination during my childhood was my aunt and uncle’s cottage on Culver Lake in northern New Jersey. I would count the days until we packed the car and began that magical ride north, with all the familiar landmarks that indicated where we were on our trip and how long it would be until we turned onto the lakeshore road. While I enjoyed the entire journey, the best part was when I first laid eyes on the blue waters of the lake that reflected the mountains that lined the north shore. We crossed the causeway on the east end of the lake and turned into the laneway that took us to the cottage; as soon as the car stopped, I would get out and run out to the dock to look at the wonderful waters that would be my summer playground. My memories of the summers spent along the waters of Culver Lake continue to bring joy to me, especially as we have entered the season of spring and begin our preparations for summers spent in favourite places, often near waters that bring us similar joy.

What I did not realize about Culver Lake was that the joy I experienced when I came to its waters was not an experience that was open to all, because Culver Lake was owned by a private association that restricted access to the lake to its members. Since my aunt and uncle were association members, we had full access to the lake and all the activities on it; but to anyone who was not a member, the beautiful waters of Culver Lake were off-limits. There were other lakes in the region that were open to the public, including a beautiful state park on the shores of Swartwood Lake that we would sometimes visit; but the waters whose memories I cherish were not available to all who might have found Culver Lake a similar source for cherished childhood experiences.

There are many places that are not open to all people, private clubs and facilities to which access is limited to only certain persons. Another major source of summertime fun in New Jersey is its shoreline on the Atlantic Ocean that is visited by millions of people every summer. While many of its beaches are open to all, some beaches restrict their access to the residents of their community; beach tags need to be worn if one wishes to be allowed to enjoy a day at the beach. Private country clubs limit access to members and guests; in one town in which I lived there

was even a private dining club that only allowed certain persons to enter its dining room. For many people, access to these “members only” facilities is only a dream; the closest they may ever get to enjoy what is inside is by looking on through the fence or door that is meant to keep them out.

The people to whom Isaiah speaks knew what it meant to be kept away from certain places, to be denied access to what was meant only for the privileged few. They were a people who had lived for decades in exile as slaves in Babylon, denied freedom and the ability to worship God that was central to their lives as the covenant people of the Lord. They were separated from the place they called home, separated from access to the Jerusalem Temple where God dwelled in their midst, and separated from the land that God had given to Abraham to be their eternal possession. Their lives were defined by the denial of access to places that the elites in their captive nation enjoyed; as slaves, they were denied even the most basic of rights to access places where they would be welcomed and where they would find sources of comfort and care. All they knew since their conquest by the Babylonians were lives defined by their limitations, by their lack of welcome and access to sources of hope and joy.

It is to these exiles that the Lord speaks through the prophet Isaiah, who first addresses them with words of comfort and reassurance: *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”* (Isaiah 40:1-2). Not only has God heard the cries of his exiled people, but the Lord promises that *“because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.”* (43:4). As God had brought God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and returned them to the promise land, the Lord God of Israel promises that *“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”* (43:19). The promises proclaimed through the prophet will be fulfilled when King Cyrus of Persia conquers the Babylonians and allows the exiled Jews to return to their homeland, to the cherished city that they had thought would only live on in their memories.

The words of hope that God proclaims through Isaiah promise not merely a return to their homeland and life as they had known it; it also promises new experiences that the people had not known before they were removed by force and enslaved in a foreign land. While the people would experience the joy of return and restoration, they were still a community to bore the physical and psychological scars of exile:

- “They are those who thirst and who have no money. They are those in need of sustenance. They are those who have experienced tragedy and scarcity through forced displacement. Memories of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem would not be too distant in their minds. The experience of exile and the loss of land would have been fresh in their minds.: - Ee Yan Tan.

Today’s First Lesson continues Isaiah’s proclamation of restoration and hope to the exiles who for far too long had only known lives of restrictions and denial of access. It begins with an invitation in which the Lord assumes the role of a street vendor inviting people to sample what the vendor is offering: *“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.”* (55:1). Unlike previous invitations that were only extended to a limited populace, the invitation that the Lord now extends is to all people, to everyone who hungers and thirsts. It is an invitation that is not even restricted to those who have the financial means to afford what is being offered; the finest things in life – not mere bread and water, but even wine and milk have been a place where access was often denied to certain persons, in the city to which God leads the returning exiles the list of those who will be included is not limited to people of social standing, not even to people with sufficient means to come properly attired. The only requirement is hunger and thirst; *“the most precious gift of all, the gift of life in God’s presence, is free.”* (Paul D. Hanson). The abundance of this free gift is contrasted to that which is only available to those with the means to pay for it: *“Why spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?”* (55:2a). That which had formerly been available only to the restricted elites pales in comparison to the goodness of the Lord’s gift that is now available to all without any barriers or restrictions, so that all may *“eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food”* (55:2b). The Lord is the one who offers the gift of salvation and life in all its abundance, both spiritually and physically; *“the blessings of the Lord’s covenant include both a joyous spiritual relationship with God and a fullness of physical life that includes a return to the land of Israel.”* (Gary W. Light). In communion with God, there will be satisfaction and true life.

As all people are invited to partake of the abundance of God’s blessing that is now available to all without any barriers or restrictions, they are also invited to hear the Word of the Lord that speaks of the covenant that unites Israel with its God. God calls upon the people to *“incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live”* (55:3a). As we have heard throughout the Bible, there is a fundamental difference between “hearing” and “listening.” “Hearing” is essentially a passive action, the ability of our ears to hear and interpret sounds. While “listening” involves

the act of hearing, it also necessitates action, a response to what is being heard. The *shema*, the central statement of faith of the people of Israel, calls upon God's people to "*Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone,*" and then to respond in an act of obedient listening when they "*shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Jesus' call to his disciples is one of living in obedience to the word they have heard from him: "*Let everyone with ears listen!*" (Matthew 11:15). The people are called to listen to the word of God proclaimed through the prophet so that they may receive the blessings that such listening will bestow upon them: "*I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.*" (55:3b). The Lord's promise from within the reality of exile is a reinterpretation of the covenant God made with David that "*your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.*" (2 Samuel 7:16). In the name of the same God who invites all people to the banquet, the prophet announces that God's plan has not been defeated by the ruin of the royal house of David due to the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 587 BC, but rather that the everlasting covenant is now expanded beyond the privileged elite to embrace the entire community of those obedient to God's Word; the everlasting covenant has not been negated but expanded. The call of those who respond to God's invitation to all with obedient and active listening will be to serve as a "witness to the peoples" so that they "*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.*" (55:5); the vocation of being a "witness to the peoples" that had been assigned to David and his descendants would now pass to the entire community of those faithful to God.

- "The covenant with historical roots now has a forward-looking thrust, whereby the glory of God will be reflected and embodied by the redeemed community, who will in turn be witnesses to the nations ... through their experience of the Lord's divine redemption and providence, the people of God can be witnesses to the greatness of the Holy One of Israel. Through their witness, nations will be compelled to also recognize the glory and work of the Lord." – Tan.

The witness to all peoples includes a call to repentance and the reception of pardon and forgiveness from God, in keeping with the prophet's earlier proclamation that "*Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness*" (1:27). It is only through repentance and the reception of pardon from God that eyes and minds can be open to the way of God and the mysterious accomplishment of God's Word over again human pretensions and expectations. The prophet therefore

urges the people to “*seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near,*” so that the people might “*return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*” (55:6-7). To “seek the LORD” implies sincere repentance and reliance upon God; it means “*to draw near to the Lord, to respond to the Lord’s offer*” (Walter Brueggemann). The prophet offers a gracious invitation to a caring, personal relationship with the Lord, calling the people to “return” (“repent”), for God’s grace is available now and it is the Lord’s desire to display mercy and lovingkindness to all from the God who the prophet assures those who return to God will “abundantly pardon” (“*When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD*” (Jeremiah 29:13-14). It is a “*genuine willingness to turn one’s life around, to express a trust in the Lord through obedience, [that] is the type of faith that is able to receive God’s grace.*” (Light).

- “God never tires of forgiving; it is we who get tired of asking him for forgiveness. Why does God never tire of forgiving us? Because he is God, because he is mercy, and because mercy is the first attribute of God. The name of God is mercy.” – Pope Francis.

The mercy and forgiveness that God freely offers to all who return from him is rooted in the love of God that is beyond human comprehension: “*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.*” (55:8-9). In drawing attention to the vast distinction between God’s ways and thought as opposed to human ways and thoughts, the prophet is not simply saying that human logic cannot comprehend the plans of God; “*these words communicate the desire of the Lord to share such high, wonderful, and mysterious plans with all who would join the community of faith.*” (Light). It is the gift of mercy and grace that is at the heart of God’s invitation to all people to know that there are no restrictions or barriers to prevent us from coming into God’s presence and receive the blessings of the abundance of our Lord, who showers all blessings upon all people “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!*” (Small Catechism).

The invitation of the prophet to all people and nations to the Lord of grace, mercy, and steadfast love reaches its fulfillment in the call of our Lord Jesus Christ for all people to “*come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*” (11:28). It is the call from our Lord and Saviour who fulfills

God's promise of one who shall be the Redeemer of all nations and the Saviour of all peoples, who calls on his apostles to "*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" (Matthew 28:19). As the prophet called upon God's people to "come to the waters," in obedience to Christ's command we come again to the waters of Holy Baptism, where through water and the Word these two children will be "*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.*" These waters of baptism remind us that in these waters is the promise of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation for all people; there are no barriers or restrictions to prevent anyone from coming to these waters in which we are born anew to a living hope. As the Ethiopian pointed to the waters along the road he was traveling with Philip and asked the apostle "*look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" (Acts 8:36-37), we rejoice in the good news that the waters of baptism are open to all because Jesus Christ is Lord of all and desires that all people receive the blessings that come to us when through this holy sacrament we are born anew to a living hope as children of our God of grace, mercy, and steadfast love.

- "Baptism still involves people in the whole body of Christ. It may mean participation in the routines of a parish, suffering under a nameless burden, carrying on in unaesthetic and personally distasteful surroundings, loving the unlikeable, accepting the unacceptable. But the test remains in the concreteness and visibility that the new life daily takes. Those who rise from their baptismal water delivered and cleansed now carry the wounds of Christ in the midst of the world so that his glory may shine forth." – Martin Marty.

As I fondly remember the joy that the waters of Culver Lake brought me, I am saddened that a similar joy could not be experienced by those who were not privileged to enjoy its pristine waters. But I rejoice that the waters of new life that bring us new life in Christ are open to all who would receive the blessings of this holy sacrament. God's waters are open to all – let us come to these waters through which we receive mercy, grace, and life through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen.