

“One More Year”
Isaiah 55, Luke 13:1-9
Lent 3 C
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You have been told that God is good. Well, just *how* good do you suppose your God is?

In the ancient world water was sold in the streets. If you wanted to be philanthropic, you could buy up a big stock of water from the water-carrier and then direct him to distribute it *gratis* to whomever wanted it. But according to Isaiah 55 it looks as though this God goes way further than that. Wine and milk. Fat, delicate food. Expensive food. Luxurious food.¹ As good as free water might be, your God is much better than that.

How good do you suppose your God is?

The Deuteronomic Code in the Bible suggested said that good people lived long, blessed lives, and bad people died young and in misery.² This code framed a kind of moral symmetry to the world. All things finally would come out right with the just and the evil each getting their desserts. That expectation was a common feature of the teaching of the rabbis. But Isaiah 55 announces that God is much better than that. Everyone is invited, even people you do not now know, without discrimination between the deserving and those who are not.

How good do you suppose your God is?

Freud's position was that you and I construct an image of God out of our wishes, either stated or imagined. He would say that God may represent that perfect father (or mother) we never had. It's a brilliant theory, but according to Isaiah 55, your God is much better than that. His ways are further from your ways that projection doesn't come close to explaining it.

How good do you suppose your God is?

There was the sense in Israel that those who prospered in life were demonstrating God's obvious mercy with them. The Calvinism of the Americans experience further amplified that notion by implying that those who led disciplined lives, worked hard, prospered and lived well was a direct

¹ Christopher R. North, *Second Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 255.

² C.f. Deuteronomy 5: 28-33. “It was an axiom among some Jewish religious teachers that God in this life rewards the righteous and punishes the ‘wicked’.” Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing, 1972), p. 156f.

result of God's choice of them to be blessed.³ Isaiah goes much further than that. Isaiah writes that God is much better than that.

How good do you suppose your God is?

Somewhere along the line someone might have taught us that God is the great police officer of the universe, rewarding the good and punishing the evil. To this view God keeps the upright on the straight and narrow, and God makes things very unpleasant for the ungodly. But Isaiah 55 argues that God is much better than that.

How good do you suppose your God is?

The story I heard – it might be true or false – has Martin Luther approached with the question of what happens to those who die without have known Christ or having been baptized. The fear was that those who were baptized were going to be OK, and those that weren't. . . .well.

Luther's response – again I couldn't find the reference – was that the technical answer was, "I don't know." "But," he quickly added, "every time he has dealt with this God, God has turned out to be *much better* than he expected." It's an answer which could have been inspired from a reading of Isaiah 55.

How good do you suppose your God is?

Three years is a Semitic reference to completeness.⁴ Giving three years for a tree to bear fruit, well that's plenty. You've given it appropriate and ample time to bear fruit. You have a better God than that. By an act of sheer mercy the gift of "one more year" is granted. No one has ever done that before.

How good a God do you think has claimed you? Better than you could construct on your own. Better than your or I could project. Better than you or I could imagine. This God is much, much better than you expected, moving beyond his own people (Israel) and getting the attention of the whole world. This God is much, much better than you and I expected offering not water only but fat food and wine to everyone who comes. We never would have come up with this on our own.⁵ This God is much better than you or I expected because his ways are not your ways, his thoughts your thoughts.

So, now what are you going to do, now that God turns out to exceed our every expectation? What are you going to do now that God turns out to be much better than you might ever imagine?

³ See especially Max Weber, "Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism," *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, (1958) 2004), pp. 155-83.

⁴ Danker, p. 157.

⁵ On verse 8, "In our hearts we never would have gotten the idea of a free forgiveness of sins." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 17: 255.

This goodness of God is not to be confused with a no-fault God. The no-fault God is warm and cosy asking nothing in return. David Tiede writes,

Those who would reduce Jesus to a sentimental savior of a doting God have not come to terms with the depth of divine passion, of the wrath and the love of God which is revealed in Jesus' word, will, and obedience even unto death.⁶

No, God will not let you and me off the hook for what he expects of us. This God is better than indifferent to how things are going in his creation. This God will tell the truth about us. Telling the truth about ourselves goes by the biblical code word *repentance*.

Telling the truth about ourselves is what you and I do before this worship truly begins. We began this worship with *Confession and Forgiveness*, emboldened by the news that God turns out to be better than we ever imagined, we have a truth-telling session with God. In that confession we tell the truth about ourselves. This is a practice of "letting go" of ourselves, so that we can then "take hold" of God.

Indeed, on a daily basis God calls all to repentance. On a daily basis I somehow need to let go of all of the gods I would rather answer to, including myself. On a daily basis I need to tell the truth that all my bets on life have come up empty, and my only hope is trust in God. On a daily basis I need to hear of the exceeding goodness of God and dare to trust this good God with a letting go of all of the mirages my self chases after – it is a quite human thing to do – and take hold again of God. On a daily basis I need to hear the gospel of the good news about God such that I might dare to let go and take hold afresh of this God and all this God's promises. That is repentance.

Repentance is more than a mood. A person in jail may regret his irresponsible behavior. Someone with a headache may regret how much they drank the night before. But to regret is not the same as repentance.

You might repent with sadness. With deep and abiding sorrow for what you have done, your wasted years, your distorted life. A person might with sadness reach out for Christ and the forgiveness promised there.

You might repent out of anger. In utter disgust over one's choices in life, one might hate ones self for what one is or has become. You might repent out of a disgust of realizing where this has all led for you.

You could also repent with a sense of humor, an appreciation of the absurdity of life. Realizing what a ridiculous figure one has become, all this chasing around to be recognized before others, when all the time you and I have been created to be the children of God, free to love God and neighbor with reckless abandon. Realizing each day that we have become driven by appetites

⁶ David L. Tiede, *Luke* (Augsburg Commentary), (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1988), p. 244.

and ambitions we end up looking like slaves to all of it. One can let go of that with a chuckle so that one can hold fast to God's promises⁷.

Isaiah 55 is a marvelous chapter. You've heard of altar calls. This is the banquet call. "Ho!", getting everyone's attention. Like a town crier, God walks the streets and announces to people you don't even know yet, "Come, for now everything is ready." Anyone who ignores or runs from that invitation does so at his or her peril. You never know when or if that call will come again.

And Jesus tells the story of the fig tree that had been given plenty of time to produce. He tells of the farmer's resolve to fertilize and tend devotedly to this tree. He tells of the good news that the owner grants, "one more year." This is our "one more year." "Seek the Lord, while he may be found." It's Lent. It's now or never. There's no time like right now.

You've been told that God is good. Just how good do you think your God is? Ok, so, what are you going to do now, with your "one more year?"

⁷ The outline of the last four paragraphs and the language is from Alvin N. Rogness, *Captured By Mystery* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1966), p. 44.