

Isaiah 55:1-9
March 23, 2025

Three Times

Biblical history refers first to the actions of God, mainly in Creation and Redemption. Perhaps it should be called divine history. Part of that story involves independent actions of mankind, humanity, in response.

The first human action was *an act of defiance*. There are some people in the world, who are not happy with this understanding of things because they believe it involves a negative view of human nature, which is an affront to human self-esteem. I *should* say, that some people are open about their unhappiness with this understanding. Somewhere in each of us there is an affinity for this unhappiness. People do not like being told of their sinfulness. The spirit of the age is to be as positive as can be.

They are, of course, right, but just because something seems negative or an assault on pride does not mean it isn't true. The evidence for its truthfulness is overwhelming.

There is a good way to be defiant. When people perceive themselves to be in a situation of some kind, pressed to think or be or do anything not only against their will, but also against deeply held convictions, in that case, an act of defiance is a sign of courage, of a healthy self-esteem. It signals the willingness to stand alone for the right to be, to take a stand on the basis of conviction.

But the human defiance of God is nothing but problematic. It is presented to us in biblical thought as the source of *all* the world's problems. The reason why our lives are as good as they are, why we experience blessing and a measure of prosperity, a provisional peace and a sense of security, although we are always in the presence of threats, we do live in the Valley of the Shadow of Death; the reason we know laughter and pleasing experiences, is to be attributed to the Grace of God. The appropriate response is gratitude.

The reason for failure and disappointment, and all that is associated with pain and suffering, the moral struggle, as well as the anxiety that accompanies them, is the result of that act of human defiance by the first human beings; and because one way or another, we have each participated in that free act of disobedience.

As we have seen in the first two weeks of the Lenten study on the Book of Isaiah, this early Judean prophet, had a very close relationship with the reality and results of human sinfulness. He minced no words about the relationship between the one and the other, between Israel's failures to be the nation God called it to be, a nation of priests, and the approach of their neighbor enemies who sought to conquer them.

Here in the 55th chapter of this wonderful book, we find an example of another aspect of Isaiah's thought, that he also had a close relationship with the reality and results of grace. He not only hits the high notes

once, but several times, and in this chapter is one of them;

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters, and you who have no money, come, buy and eat.” Then he goes on to say, “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near. *Let the wicked forsake his way, and the evil person his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, who will have mercy on him, and to our Lord, for he will freely pardon.*”

It has been said in the form of a cliché, “to err is human, to forgive divine.” It should not then be very surprising that the next lines in the poetry of Isaiah after the proclamation of mercy, address the distinction between human and divine capabilities, and the gap that presents itself between them. The idea is introduced that at some level people must expect, and accept, that they will not be able to understand . . . the things of God; that acknowledging the inability to understand has spiritual value.

Thus the next lines in the poem; “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Looking back over the last several years, each time this text appears in the readings, I choose it over the psalm, the gospel, and the epistle, or at least in partnership with them. And when choosing a title, I have leaned towards, “Higher Ways,” or, “Higher

Thoughts.” I am impressed by this text. As a matter of fact, today’s message is the third time I have moved in the direction of such a title. Instead, it is simply called, “Three Times.”

It bears emphasis, of course, that the issue at hand is mercy, forgiveness itself, perhaps the least well understood of the divine ways. The claim of the Bible is that forgiveness is a part of the fabric of reality, the air we breathe, that mercy is God’s nature.

This theme is not news to us. Yet we will always need to be reminded of it. Like other aspects of the biblical message, it has been repeated many times and we have heard it before. Listen to just a few of the examples from scripture that speak to it:

“Be kind and compassionate, forgiving each other as in Christ, God has forgiven you.” Ephesians 4:32

“Bear with each other, and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Colossians 3:13

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”
Matthew 6:12

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins and will heal their land.” 2
Chronicles 7:14

“God demonstrated his love for us in this. While we were yet sinners, *Christ died for us.*” Romans 5:8

And that is where it all leads of course, to the cross of Christ, where, among other things, God’s unfathomable mercy is revealed and set before us in the most stark contrast to the ways of the world.

Yet the human capacity to err persists, along with failures of mercy. Certainly forgiveness *does* happen among people, but we must confess that it is a struggle, and that when it happens, it is a grace. So in this moment we stress it again. To the degree that we fail, it is a part of our unhealthiness; and to the degree that God’s grace is victorious in us, it is a part of our health and peace.

So let it be said that mercy is an important part of life, that real mercy is comprehensive, it allows no partial application. Thus it is restorative, a crucial piece of any reconciliation. Without it, human relationships are impossible. It may also be said that when mercy becomes a lifestyle, it opens up vistas of joy and depth and meaning that stagger the imagination and boggle the mind, that beggars the human capacity for reason, that is, it is among the highest of God’s higher ways.

Thus we hear the magnificent words of the end of this great chapter;

“You will go out in joy, and be led forth in peace, the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, all

the trees of the field will clap their hands . . . This will be for the Lord’s renown, for an everlasting sign, which will *not be destroyed.*”

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