

**The Hope of Lent  
Isaiah 55**

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Port Williams United Baptist Church  
3rd Sunday in Lent, 2022**

Back during our first Covid lockdown, when everything was new and exciting, when we thought this was just a few weeks thing, when we were recording and posting our services on YouTube, someone came by the office and commented how much they were enjoying the online services.

*"What I like is that I can just fast forward through the parts I don't like!"*

I think he was joking, but I can't be sure!

I can't be sure because we all do that!

On Sundays after I get home I sit and watch the services of several friends. I confess that rarely (OK, never) do I watch the whole service. I just watch the part I want to see.

If you could do that, what parts of the service would you watch? Which part would you fast forward through?

Even when you are here, what are the parts that you mentally fast forward through, the parts that really don't resonate with your soul?

The call to worship, the prayer, the special music, the sermon?

It is OK. We all have those parts. There was a time when our daughter and son in law would come in late to the service just so they would miss the parts of the service they didn't like.

And even if you don't fast forward through them, are there parts that you just zone out in? Maybe you just let your mind wander, think about lunch, your plans for this afternoon, plans for summer vacation.

I know! There are times during worship when I am so focused on what I have to do, what comes next that I just miss out on something that I know I should be paying attention to. I know I should be paying attention, because I have worked hard to plan the service; to see that things fit together, that there is a flow to the service. But there are times....

Full confession. It is usually during the scripture reading. I have spent so much time with it during the week that I know what it says. I know what theologians and scholars have said about the passage. I know the historical background, when it was written, to whom it was written, why it was written.

So why should I pay attention? After all, I have a sermon based on the text?

Do you ever fade out during the reading of the scripture? Do you care what it says? Is it *"the word of the Lord,"* or just some words that fill up the time? Would it matter to you if we read a poem by Mary Oliver instead, or maybe a passage from the latest Peter

Jacobson movie? Do you listen to the reading of the scripture, hear what it says, or is it just the sound of the Charlie Brown teacher, BWAABABAWAH?

I wonder.

Then there are those times.

It happened with the text this week. It happened the first time I read it a few months ago, when I was planning for this sermon; it happened when I read it last week as I started putting the worship service together; it happened over and over again this week as I have worked on this sermon.

This is a word that I so need to hear. I really need this text.

In the midst of a world in which there is enough going on that makes me want to climb into a hole and shut out the world; in a time of such transition and upheaval that I just don't know how to plan; in a world where going to the grocery store or the gas station is a shock to my system and my checkbook—this text is/was a word from God.

Did you hear it?

*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.  
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that  
which does not satisfy?  
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.*

Maybe it was because I had awoken in the middle of the night, with the blankets keeping me warm, too warm, but I woke up without an ounce of water in my body; feeling like my mouth was full of sand.

Maybe it was that trip to the grocery store when the cost of a loaf of bread, a pack of chips was enough to send me into crisis mode. I went to get some chicken only to discover that there wasn't any in the store! None! At any price!

And then I hear these words—come and drink, eat. Come up to a vineyard and drink to your heart's content. Don't worry about the price because it is all free!

Maybe you hear those words and it echoes with your soul as you work day and night, long hours and wonder at the end of the pay period, "Is this it? Is this worth all the sweat and tears and soul that I pour into my job? If this it? I do all of that and I get this paycheck, but my soul is barren, cold, dead."

Do these verses resonate with you? Is there a word of hope that, that just causes your heart to leap?

Did you hear it?

*I'm making a lasting covenant commitment with you, the same that I made with David:  
sure, solid, enduring love.*

*I set him up as a witness to the nations, made him a prince and leader of the nations,  
And now I'm doing it to you:*

*You'll summon nations you've never heard of, and nations who've never heard of you  
will come running to you*

*Because of me, your God, because The Holy of Israel has honored you."*

Do we even dare believe that a commitment can be made, trusted? In a time where nothing seems permanent. Divorces are as numerous as marriages; relationships are good for right now, we will see. Even countries seem to be torn asunder with different areas wanting to go their own way; forgetting that "we" is stronger than "me."

We live in a world where it seems the only rule is that the stronger wins. We watch with horror as national borders are as flimsy as paper, but at other times when borders that we have counted on as being porous have become impenetrable, closed because of a virus we can't see but fear so much.

Can we, dare we believe that there is a time where relationships might be repaired, even thriving, life giving? Is this just a fantasy played out in religious sounding words? Or are these words of hope that might call us to something more? Something deeper.

Did you hear it?

*Seek God while he's here to be found,  
pray to him while he's close at hand.*

*Let the wicked abandon their way of life  
and the evil their way of thinking.*

*Let them come back to God, who is merciful,  
come back to our God, who is lavish with forgiveness.*

There have been those days in these past years, haven't they, when the thought has passed through our minds, maybe even taking up residence in our souls—Where is God?

It has come as we have been isolated from each other, from our families, from our support networks; when we couldn't, or maybe wouldn't risk coming to church; when as the days and weeks and months went on we just wondered if God has moved on.

Those were the feelings of those Israelites in exile. Cut off from the temple they felt they were cut off from God. But Isaiah comes with a reminder, a word of encouragement. Don't wait! Seek God now. No matter what you have done, or not done; now is the time to throw yourself on the steadfast eternal mercy of God.

Did you hear it?

*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.*

It is easy for us to think that we can know pretty much anything these days. Thursday morning at Coffee and Conversation a question came up about St. Patrick and before we knew it someone had pulled up a biography. We can know at the drop of a hat.

In such a world it is easy for us to think that we know as much as God. This week the first pictures came back from the James Webb telescope, peering deep into space, catching a picture of a star that is just amazing.

We can know, but at what cost?

Several years ago Juan Monroy interviewed James Irwin, one of the astronauts on the Apollo 15 mission to the moon. Monroy asked, *“What did you feel when you stepped out of that capsule and your feet touched the surface of the moon?”*

To his utter surprise, Irwin replied, *“It was one of the most profoundly disillusioning moments of my life.”*

Irwin explained, *“All of my life I have been enchanted by the romance and the mystery of the moon. I sang love songs under the moon. I read poems by moonstruck poets. I embraced my lover in the moonlight. I looked up in wonder at the lunar sphere. But that day when I stepped from the capsule onto the lunar surface and reached down at my feet, I came up with nothing but two handfuls of gray dirt. I cannot describe the loss I felt as the romance and mystery were stripped away. There will be no more moon in my sky!”*

Monroy later further, *“When we come to the place that we think we comprehend and can explain the Almighty, there will be no more God in our heavens.”<sup>1</sup>*

There is something deep inside us that needs mystery, to keep us from feeling that everything, everything depends on us.

Did you hear it?

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

This is that in-between time, when you never know whether it will be rain or snow, or maybe both or neither. This is that time when everything is wet and muddy. Mud season isn't the one that Nova Scotia Tourism advertises.

But it is so important. For it prepares us for what is about to come. I remember the first year we were here, amazed one morning as the I came from Wolfville that the world has magically been transformed. It went from brown to the most vibrant green I think I had ever seen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/3231>

God says, that is what I want to do in you. I want to nourish you with the snow and rain of my word, so your soul will not be barren, but a place full of life. Can you believe it? Do you dare hope it?

Did you hear it?

*For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the  
field shall clap their hands.  
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,  
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.*

God is going to transform our world, not just us but all of creation. If we listen, truly listen we will hear everything singing the glory of God. From the streams running full with melted snow, to the birds returning from their winter voyage, to the farm winds calling forth the blooms of spring.

Can you hear it?

And if God is going to do that in the dirt, in the trees, in the birds, what might God do in you? Could the briars that have taken root, keeping others away be transformed into a tree you might sit under, together.

God is doing this!

Do you hear it?

Dare we dream it?

We are midway through Lent. Lent comes from the Old English word meaning spring. Might the hope of this season spring into full glory in us.

It will happen if we just pay attention, listen.

Can you hear it?