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MODULE 4

Feminist Reading of Scriptures. Bible study

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Isaiah 55

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 labor 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. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, 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. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let 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. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. 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. 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.

A Free and Glorious Offer of Plenty for All who Thirst for God's Grace

The theme, "Creation—Not for Sale," demands that we look at God's creation that surrounds us. What we see when we look at the world through the lens of this theme is rather ugly: climate change and ecological crisis; genetic engineering for the profit of transnationals and to the detriment of the people; hunger and overconsumption; etc.

Have you ever attended an LWF event at which you have gone hungry? Perhaps we cannot imagine what might have been the impact of the prophet's words:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money (silver), 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 labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food (fatness). Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live (Isa 55:1–3).

These verses stand at the beginning of chapter 55 in the book of Isaiah. This chapter can be divided into two units (vs 1–5; 6–13) or into five units (vs 1–3a; 3b–5; 6–9; 10–11; 12–13). This separation is based on the change in person (for example, starting from an "I" who calls "come to me" to an unknown group of servants in vs 1–3, to the reference to the cypress and the myrtle as memorials of God in v. 13, all in the third person) as well as on a change of theme: invitation to a free meal; a new covenant; a call to repentance—a shift from desert to forest. Because certain themes occur throughout the chapter, we will look at the whole text without paying equal attention to each verse.

Chapter 55 ends the second part of the book of Isaiah that started in chapter 40 with another imperative: "Comfort (plural), O comfort my people" In chapter 55, just as in chapter 40, someone gives an order and expects obedience: "Listen carefully to me! Incline your ear! Come to me! Ho! ..." No less than eleven imperatives are uttered in Isaiah 55:1–3a. But, who are these imperatives addressed to? Since this is not made explicit, the reader can interpret the commands in different ways, depending on how they perceive the chapter's structure, its multiple voices and pronouns ("you" singular, "you" plural, "I," "they," ...), and the connection to other sections of the book of Isaiah. Is this not part of what we usually do when we read? Do we not ask, Who is being referred to? Who is being addressed? Who is speaking? Is there anything I do not understand? This is precisely where our hermeneutical task starts, namely in trying to understand what we read before we apply its teaching to our own situation.

Who is the one offering free food in Isaiah 55? The subject may be Wisdom (as in Proverbs 9), a king (as in Esther 1; see also Luke 14), or a merchant. Perhaps all these possibilities came to the audience's mind. They probably recalled not only those who had offered them water, but also situations of want in their lives.

By addressing the audience as the [thirsty] in 55:1, a sequential reader is invited to recollect how thirst has been a metaphor for a longing for change. By offering [water] to such people, the sequential reader would call to mind images of water turning deserts into paradises and making travel through previously impassible terrain into an all-you-can-drink-and-

*eat luxury tour. This would certainly foster hope. The audience is now being asked to respond to these images through this invitation.*¹

The Word of God is perceived in specific socio-political situations, not in a heavenly vacuum. God spoke and speaks to people immersed in many different situations—be they happy or stressful; rich or poor; times of peace or war; youth or old age; “topdog” or “underdog.”

Question

After reading chapter 55, which social, economic and political issues (tensions) may have been on the prophet’s mind?

Imagine you are in an arid place, your throat is dry and it is a hot day. What would you not give for a glass of water? How much would you pay for it? But it comes for free to you and to anybody who is thirsty. And not only water, but also grain, milk and wine. I wondered why the text speaks of buying it when it is free: is it a commercial transaction, or is it a gift? Why would Isaiah speak of “buying,” rather than “receiving”? Perhaps it is a manner of contrasting those who have so far not been able to buy because they lack silver (v. 1) with those who have had the means to buy: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” asks the prophet in verse 2. These verses remind us that in times of scarcity of food (because of drought or plague, for instance) prices rise exponentially, reaching immoral levels; the rich can buy and accumulate supplies while the poor starve. But to God, these purchases are not satisfying.

We can note a progression in the prophet’s thought—from the street vendor’s cry to come and acquire water, even without money, to an ethical assessment of the drive to accumulate. The text does not list the acquired objects: is it food, as we have imagined by contrasting verses 1 and 2? Is it luxury items, as those the prophet Amos (3:15; 6:4) criticized by referring to “houses of ivory”? Electronic gadgets? Cars? Diamonds? Hard currency in the bank? Land? Is it joining “house to house ... field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land,” as Isaiah denounced in 5:8? What is it that we seek to possess whenever we feel insecure or out of sorts?

Regardless of what it was that the prophet saw the people coveted, what we are told is that they do not fill the “throat” (the Hebrew uses the same word to refer to the throat and since that is where the air needed to live passes through, it refers also to a living being, to the “soul,” to one’s self). They will leave us hungry, for only God’s word can satisfy: YHWH “humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of YHWH” (Deut 8:3).

Please note that the text does not say “go hungry and live from God’s Word” or “you will be fed in the kingdom to come, meantime remain thirsty.” No, on the contrary, what the prophet envisions is a political program that allows everyone to eat richly, but not at the expense of other people or by exploiting creation. For Isaiah (and now I am speaking of all

¹ Andrew T. Abernethy, *Eating in Isaiah: Approaching the Role of Food and Drink in Isaiah’s Structure and Message* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 131.

the voices comprised in this book—the one in eighth-century Jerusalem; the one at the time of the exile; and the one when restoration seemed to bring back the old bad ways—to listen to God’s word means to live in justice and righteousness, to fast and to feast, but in justice and righteousness.

They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split open the rock and the water gushed out. "There is no peace," says YHWH, "for the wicked" (Isa 48:21–22).

Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says YHWH; and I will heal them. But the wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked (Isa 57:19–21)

In the Bible, the expression “there is no peace” with the negative particle and *shālôm* is rare. In total it occurs only six times. The expectation was to have peace, not “no peace.” The Hebrew language has several words to express imbalance in human relationships, with creation and with Creator, such as “abomination,” “evil,” or “outcry” (see the nice wordplay between *mišpāt* “justice” and *mišpāh* “oppression,” and between *sēdāqā* “righteousness” and *sē`āqā* “a cry,” in Isa 5:7). “No peace” might involve war as well as other, less disruptive experiences. However, in the two utterances in Isaiah 55 the contrast is not with war but with a life of abundant blessings expressed by water in the desert, over against unrest and sickness. We have come across several opposites—buying without money; getting wine and milk without paying for them; spending your salary without satisfaction. This is a typical biblical way of expressing something; there are no shades of gray, only black and white.

What is it that the poet wants to express? Right hearkening to God’s Word means right behavior toward the neighbor. And here Isaiah is not speaking in individual terms, but in terms of society, culture, kingdom: verses 3b–5 speak of a covenant between the people and God; a covenant that will also attract other nations to God (vs 6–9). Israel was once exiled, expelled from its land and its temple, but now the movement will be centripetal and unknown nations will be attracted to Israel and its God once again, as long as Israel does not behave as the wicked do for whom there is no peace.

It has just been suggested that Isaiah does not speak in individual terms, but in general terms, namely of culture. Take another look at our text:

Seek the YHWH while he may be found ... let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts ... For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says YHWH. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. 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 (Isa 55:6–11).

Rain does not produce bread; it produces mud, which eventually allows for the seed to sprout and produce grain. But bread is a human-made product; as such it is a part of culture. And here God states that God’s Word is like the rain or the snow. Yes, water is vital for life—for plants and animals; for drinking; for cleaning; to stay healthy. For rain to

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produce bread requires human effort. Likewise, in order for God's Word to fructify, human agency is necessary. Nonetheless, we have to confess, that often in "creating bread" human efforts damage and abuse creation, rather than being attuned to God's plan. In this context, genetic manipulation, monocultures, and the privatization of water spring to mind. Unrest, sickness, dissatisfaction and overconsumption may be turned into forgiveness, a meaningful life, bread and wine, water and milk for all nations, even for those the religious system had previously left out (see Deut 23). When God lets God's presence be felt, people are receptive to God's presence (vs 6–7), and thus culture is tuned into God's will.

The last two verses serve as a closure for our chapter, the section of the book dealing with return from the exile (Isaiah 40-55) and, given their eschatological tone, also the present age. They include the whole of creation in the celebration of God's great deeds. Again, like at the beginning, the addressees are the plural, undetermined "you." Only this time there is a promise rather than a command: "you shall go out in joy." Where to is not revealed, but this indeterminacy helps us to hold onto a promise that may be fulfilled in our own time and at all times. You will be led from whichever situation of oppression (desert), "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" (vs. 12-13a). Thorns and briars are plants that grew on the ruins of a city that had been destroyed and abandoned (Hos 10:8); cypresses and myrtles, on the contrary, symbolize abundance and stability (Isa 41:19, Hos 14:8). For the Hebrew Bible, salvation implies deliverance from evil, from danger, from thirst, from death, from slavery; salvation requiring stability to grow, like the trees. It is feeling on one's skin, throat and belly that God is not sleeping while we are in danger. YHWH is watching.

Questions

1. What does it mean to you that nature accompanies your salvation? What experiences of God's *shālôm* (salvation, deliverance, salutary life) can you share? As you share experiences, please think particularly of creation, not only of human beings.
2. Are there aspects of *shālôm* that are particularly gender determined?

As we approach the end of the Bible study, we notice the poet wondering what the purpose of this transformation of nature is. The very last words of this verse state that "it shall be to YHWH for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off." (v. 13b). While many versions translate "name" as "memorial," there is more to someone's name than a memorial. The expression "for a name" (Hebrew *lěšēm*) appears twenty-nine times in the Hebrew Bible, of which all but one refer to YHWH's honor, holiness, presence, or glory. For instance:

At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of YHWH, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the YHWH in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will (Jer 3:17).

My father David had it in mind to build a house for the name of the YHWH, the God of Israel (1 Kgs 8:17).

Often God promises to transfer that divine honor to God's people:

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Save us, O YHWH our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise (Ps 106:47).

At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the YHWH(Zeph 3:20).

Another prophet, Ezekiel, envisioned YHWH's mercy in terms of providing a "splendid vegetation," (literally, "a planting of renown") through which other nations would move from contempt to admiration for YHWH's chosen nation:

I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations (Eze 34:29).

"Creation—not for Sale" is today's theme. We have seen that God does not plan to sell YHWH's creation. On the contrary, God intends to share its resources for free, particularly with those who would otherwise be unable to survive: water for the thirsty; grain for the hungry; salvation for all. The question that every generation must answer anew is how are we to respond to that dream of God, to share creation in a godly way; what will our "work" for it be. Several more texts could be referred to, but at this point, we would rather stay with these last words:

and it shall be to YHWH for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off

And may God's people shout, Amen!