

Encountering God: Accepting the Invitation

Isaiah 55:1-3

“Come, all you who are thirsty,

come to the waters;

and you who have no money,

come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk

without money and without cost.

2 Why spend money on what is not bread,

and your labor on what does not satisfy?

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,

and you will delight in the richest of fare.

3 Give ear and come to me;

listen, that you may live.

All around the world people are encountering God as Father in a deeper way. Hearts, minds and lives are being transformed as they experience this love and become more alive to life as it is intended to be, living in our true identity as God’s sons and daughters.

The theme for 2015: “Encountering God in Community.”

Our goal is to enable people – individuals, families and communities – to encounter the Presence of God and advance His Kingdom.

As a part of the family of God, the people of UBC will know their identity as sons and daughters and will play their part in transforming their communities and spheres of influence by releasing His goodness, re-presenting the ministry of Jesus and seeing the Kingdom of God come with power.

When I was a teenager, my mom asked me to do chores each week. Frustrated, I would tell my mom to just write down what I needed to do and I would mark it off the list when I finished. I wasn't interested in listening to why she wanted me to do it and I wasn't interested in talking to her. I just wanted to get it done. What I didn't realize was my mom wasn't asking me to complete a task; she was trying to teach me something that would benefit me later in life and she wanted to do it through building relationship, not rules.

Too often we want to dive into tasks without tending to the relationship.

It's just easier. It happens all the time in marriages, friendships and even with God.

One of the most deadly things we can do as a born-again believer is succumb to the lie that Jesus wants us to "do" a lot of things on His list. He does want us to "do" things, but not without an understanding of our true identity as sons and daughters.

We aren't employees of the king but sons and daughters. We have rights and privileges that employees don't and it revolves around relationship.

It's OK to ask questions of God regarding His thoughts, plans and ways instead of assuming them or just doing what may be on our spiritual "list" for the day.

I encourage you to take some time to refresh your relationship with God, and let him tend to your heart.

Encountering God – as a lifestyle!

For the church to be healthy, we must first encounter God.

What does it mean to encounter God?

In this context I believe it means we engage with Him – heart-to-heart.

Do we really trust Him? Do we enjoy Him?

Do we come to Him confident of His delight in us as His children?

Do we know how to process struggles and trials with Him and find our hearts fully met?

First, we must know that God is far more motivated to heart connect with us than we are with Him! He wants to meet with us and talk with us. He longs to have two-way conversation with us. How can there be true friendship if all the conversation is one way? Actually, He wants us to live listening to Him!

(Deuteronomy 8:3) He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

The enemy's primary focus is to stop us enjoying intimacy with God. He knows that without intimacy we will always ultimately and be ineffective and unfruitful.

(John 15:5). "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

The underlying root of our deepest struggles can be reduced to lies from the enemy we have chosen to believe about the heart of the Father – that

He is not good, that we can't trust Him – or lies we believe about ourselves and our true identity – I am worthless, I will never be enough.

Do we believe the enemy's lies? We believe, not with our heads, but with our hearts.

(Romans 10:10) For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

We get so used to subtle lies and doubts that we often accommodate them unknowingly, and our hearts become desensitized and we wonder why we struggle to enjoy intimacy with God. If we believe lies, we give the enemy authority in our lives, making it easy for him to pull us into bondage.

Lies we believe are typically born in wounds, especially when we are young and vulnerable. Perhaps we were not loved by an authority figure and the enemy sows the lie that the Father will treat us the same way. Perhaps we were abused and the devil brainwashes you into believing that it is your role to be victimized. Perhaps you were teased or bullied and you are

on a quest to be accepted. Maybe a parent or teacher was perfectionistic or even worse told you could never do something or be something and now nothing is ever good enough or you lack self-confidence.

If we don't deal with these lies they can cripple us for life.

Unless I forgive the offender, I will remain under the power of those lies through my bitterness.

The Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6) will help us identify the roots that have given rise to our sinful or dysfunctional behavior. As He helps us forgive for past wounds, renounce lies of the enemy and ourselves that were born there, we are able to fully receive His words of life spoken into our hearts, replacing the lies and setting us free.

Actively declaring and rejoicing aloud in the truth He speaks produces life in our spirit and renews our mind.

Despite the enemy's accusations, as believers we can all hear directly from Jesus in our hearts.

(John 10:27) **My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.**

His voice will always reflect the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control) and easily align with Scripture.

He will never discourage or condemn, but will always reassure you that He is for you.

The enemy has come to steal, kill and destroy but Jesus said he came that you might have life and it more abundantly. (EXPOUND)

In our text, we see that the enemy has stolen, killed and destroyed

Isaiah was addressing the people of Israel who at this time were exiled from their homeland. They had refused to obey God's laws and now they were suffering the consequences of their actions.

God had allowed the Assyrian army to be his instrument of punishment. Their land had been devastated and they had been taken into captivity in Babylon for seventy years.

These are the people who sat and wept by the rivers of Babylon, mocked by their captors, surrounded on every hand by the images of the gods who had apparently defeated Jehovah, the living God of Israel.

The people were strangers in a strange land, separated from their homeland by hundreds of miles of inhospitable wilderness. They felt alienated from their God who they believed had turned his back on them.

The glory of Jerusalem and its temple were but a faded memory that only brought them pain to think about it. These unfulfilled longings brought them to the edge of despair.

It was into this bleak spiritual wilderness that God's messenger came with a word from the Lord. It wasn't just good advice, based on human wisdom and psychology, telling them to resign themselves to their present sad condition.

No, it was a proclamation of salvation and hope.

It was an invitation to have an ENCOUNTER WITH GOD.

God Is a Very Inviting God

And what I want us to see in this first message based on verses 1–3 is that God is a very inviting God.

The word inviting has two meanings doesn't it? You can say, This spot is inviting. And you mean that it is pleasant and attractive and that you feel drawn to come here.

Or you can say, Tom is inviting us to come to his house on Thursday. And you mean that something special is happening and he says he wants us to come.

The great and wonderful thing about God is that he is inviting in both these ways. No text in the Bible shows this more vividly than Isaiah 55:1–3.

The Work of Redemption Foreseen in Isaiah

Let me put it in context for you. Back in Chapter 53 Isaiah described in amazing detail 700 years ahead of time how Christ would come and suffer and bear the sins of God's people and die in our place and rise again. Look at 53:4–6,

Surely he has borne our griefs

and carried our sorrows;

yet we esteemed him stricken,

smitten by God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions,

he was bruised for our iniquities;

upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,

and with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have turned every one to his own way;

and the Lord has laid on him

the iniquity of us all.

There is the great substitution. Christ in our place, taking our sins on himself.

Now look at his death in verse 8,

By oppression and judgment he was taken away;

and as for his generation,

who considered that he was cut off

out of the land of the living,

stricken for the transgression of my people?

So he died not for his own sin but for the sin of his people—the people who trust him and follow him.

Then look at his resurrection in verse 12,

Therefore I [God the Father] will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;

because he poured out his soul to death,

and was numbered with the transgressors;

So death was not the end of Christ. He bore the sins of many. But God then honored him with the spoils of victory over death and sin. He is now alive and reigning in heaven till he comes again.

So in Chapter 53 we can say that the prophet Isaiah sees the work of redemption as accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ 700 years in the future.

Great Blessings as a Result of Redemption

Then in Chapter 54 Isaiah foresees some of the great blessings that will come to God's people because the Messiah has overcome the problem of their guilt and sin (described in Chapter 53). Let me just show you one of these that will lead us to our Great Invitation in Chapter 55.

On Wednesday, May 31, 1792, William Carey, about to become the father of modern missions preached a sermon to his fellow Baptist pastors from Isaiah 54:2–3. He argued that this text is a great missionary text and that the point of it is that God wills for his people to expand until all the peoples of the world are included.

“Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; hold not back, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.”

In other words, one of the great blessings that would come to the people of God because of Christ's death and resurrection is that all the nations would be touched. Christ's redemption is not just for Jews. It's not just for us. It is for all the nations.

And this leads us then to The Great Invitation in Isaiah 55. If redemption is accomplished, and God's will is that the blessings of this redemptions spread to all the nations, then it does not surprise that God comes forward with a Great Invitation not just for a few, and not just for those who can pay their way, but for everyone.

Three Questions About Isaiah 55:1–3

Let's look at Chapter 55:1–3 and ask three questions:

Who are invited?

What are they offered?

What are they told to do in order to get it?

1. Who are invited?

The answer is, two kinds of people. The first kind is described in verse 1: "Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money come buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price."

The Thirsty and Broke

The first kind of person that God invites to come to him is thirsty people who can't pay for what they need. Two things: thirsty, and can't pay.

So let me say a word to those of you in this category. You have come this morning with thirst in your heart. Your heart feels like brown grass in my back yard when it hasn't rained for a long time. A lot of old hopes have dried up. Dreams have waited and almost died. Dead end streets again and again. Empty. Unfulfilled. Dissatisfied. Knowing there has to be something more to life.

But now everything that looks good is out of reach. No money. No strength. No motivation. But at least a longing. A thirst.

And the Lord says, you are just the candidate I am after: "Ho everyone who thirsts and has no money—no resources, no bargaining position, no track record, no power, no prestige, no pull. God is inviting you this morning to enjoy the banquet of salvation.

The Self-Sufficient

But there is a second kind of person whom God invites. And I'm glad, because I think that the rest of you who don't feel like you are in that category will fit into this one if you are honest. This kind of person is described in verse 2.

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

In verse 1 God said, "He who has no money come!" In verse 2 he talks to someone who has money, who has the strength to labor. The first kind of person is spiritually bankrupt and knows it. They are thirsty and broke. But the second kind of person isn't there yet. He's got money and he is spending it. He's got strength and he is laboring.

But what's the result? Frustration. He's not like the other guy—burnt out, at the end of his rope. He is still spending and still working, dreaming, chasing, searching, experimenting—different job, different city, different car, different house, different wife, new computer, new boat, new books, new bike, new grill, new season tickets, new diet, new looks—there's still a lot of looking around left in this person. But still no pot at the end of the rainbow. No fountain of youth. And every triumph peters out. The applause fades. The boat is boring. The style passes. Everything new gets old and the options get fewer and fewer.

When you are honest, you know there is a canyon of need and longing on the inside no matter how self-sufficient you look on the outside. And God knows even better than you. He has you in mind when he says, "Why do you spend your money for bread which is no-bread, and labor for dreams that do not satisfy?"

So two kinds of people are invited by the Lord: the thirsty who are broke and cannot pay; and the thirsty who think they can pay and work their way to satisfaction.

I think everybody in this room would have to admit to being in one of those two groups if we were honest with ourselves.

2. What Are We Offered?

The answer is given in three steps:

the benefits are pictured for us in verse 1,

the quality and quantity of these benefits are mentioned in verse 2,
and the reality behind the pictures is described in verse 3.

The Benefits

In verse 1 we are offered water, wine, and milk. "Ho every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

Don't these three beverages correspond to deep needs that every one of us has?

Water corresponds to the need for refreshment. When you are most thirsty and most desperate, most dehydrated, it's water that you want and nothing else. "He leads me beside still waters, he restores [refreshes] my soul." God invites you this morning to receive refreshment, restoration, reviving, a new beginning.

Milk corresponds to the need for ongoing nourishment. When someone is gasping for life, you give them water. But when you want a little baby to grow day after day, you give it milk again and again. God is not just for emergencies and mountain peaks. He is for health in the long haul. He invites you not only to come alive with water, but also to be stable and strong with milk.

Wine corresponds to the need for exhilaration. We want to live and not die. We want to be strong and stable instead of weak and wavering. But that is not all we need in life. No matter how stoic, unemotional, laid-back, or poker-faced we may seem to others, there is a child inside of every one of us that God made for exhilaration—for shouting and singing and dancing and playing and skipping and running and jumping and laughing.

So what verse 1 says is that God is willing to revive us from the heat of Death Valley with the miracle of his water; and make us strong and healthy and stable with the miracle of his milk; and then give us endless and ever-fresh exhilaration with the miracle of his wine.

The Quality and Quantity of the Benefits

The last part of verse 2 describes the quality and quantity of these benefits of water, milk, and wine. It says, "Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness."

The word "good" means that what God offers is top quality; it's the best there is. And the word "fatness" means there is a lot of it (Psalm 65:11; 36:8). The water is good and it's plentiful. The milk is good and it's plentiful. The wine is good and it's plentiful.

The Bible loves to talk about the riches of God's glory and the fullness of joy at his right hand. He gives what is best and it never runs out. "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

The Reality Behind the Imagery

Then in verse 3 God tells us what the reality is behind all this imagery. "Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David."

In verse 1 he said, "Come to the waters . . . come for wine and milk." In verse 3 he explains, "Come to me." God is our living water. God is our nourishing milk. God is our exhilarating wine.

"Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart my portion forever" (Psalm 73:25–26; 42:1–2; 63:1–3).

But we can even be more specific. He goes on to say in verse 3 that when we come to him, he makes a covenant with us. What kind of covenant?

The same kind of covenant that he made with King David in 2 Samuel 7—a covenant of "steadfast, sure love." This means that when you come to God, he binds himself by an unbreakable oath to pursue you with goodness and mercy all your days right into eternity—with ever-refreshing water, and ever-strengthening milk, and ever-exhilarating wine, forever and ever!

Which brings us to a final practical question . . .

3. What Are We Told to Do to Get These Benefits?

There are 12 imperatives in these three verses. The most pleasant, most inviting, 12 commandments you will ever hear. I'll point them out I read aloud.

1) Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters [#1]; and he who has no money, come [#2], buy [#3] and eat [#4]! Come [#5], buy wine and milk [#6] without money and without price. 2) Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Hearken diligently to me [#7] and eat what is good [#8], and delight yourselves in fatness [#9]. 3) Incline your ear [#10], and come to me [#11]; hear [#12] that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

When you ponder these 12 commandments for a moment, they fall into a natural pattern. First there are three commands to listen carefully to what God is saying (one in verse 2 and two in verse 3). So I urge you, as we close, take heed how you hear. Are you leaning into God's Word? God pleads this morning: don't let the advertisements for the world drown out this invitation to heaven!

Then all the rest of the God's bidding fall into four steps:

Come... buy...eat...enjoy.

And this is what the Bible means by faith.

Remember: in verse 1 he says, "Come to the waters," but in verse 3 he says, "Come to me." God himself is the water and the milk and the wine.

God is inviting us all to have an encounter with Him. Just as he invited the exiled Israelites centuries ago.

The commodity in shortest supply among the exiles was hope. Everything that belonged to their past had been destroyed. Their land had been ravaged. The temple in Jerusalem, the center of their worship, lay in ruins.

There was no comfort to be found in their present circumstances.

They were overwhelmed by their sense of loss, taunted by their captors, like fish out of water in an alien culture.

Life was bleak and the future didn't bear thinking about.

It was into this darkness that a word of promise came, "Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you..."

It was a word of hope. God was telling them that he still rules and is in control of events in Babylon. He's a God whose purposes are way beyond the grasp of mere humans. He knows precisely what he's doing and he is willing to transform their circumstances.

The exiles were in despair. They believed that they were doomed to remain in exile and that all was lost.

But the word from the Lord through Isaiah spoke of a new beginning.

There was, after all, a future for them.

There was going to be a second Exodus. For a second time God was going to redeem his people from captivity and lead them across the wilderness.

"You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace" (verse 12)

God will once again save his people and lead them in triumph.

Our God is the God of the "Second Chance".

Yes, the people of Judah had for the most part rejected God but he still loved them, and here he was offering them a fresh start.

There's an urgency, an imperative about the words; there's a progression in what had to be done. The invitation was to "come, buy and eat" indicating that there's more involved to God's offer of salvation than hearing the good news of the gospel and even believing it: there's a definite requirement that we make it our own by a participation of it, by "eating" it.

"Hear me", says God, "that your soul may live." This would be secured by an "everlasting covenant" as promised "to David".

God's promises to King David and his royal successors after him are now being made freely available to all the people of Israel, both high and low.

Covenant privilege has now been extended to the whole people of God. The prophecy was wonderfully fulfilled and made possible by the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, "great David's greater son".

He is the mediator and trustee of the new covenant. All believers in Jesus are members of God's royal family.

Jesus did not walk among spiritual super humans. He walked among very down-to-earth persons - people who sweated and grunted for a living, who had eyes and ears and hearts that needed opening, who had been pierced and hurt by life and love, who were cut-up, cast-out and tossed aside.

He walked among people who spoke crudely, moved roughly, and thought coarsely. He talked with fishermen, fishwives, prostitutes and their customers, soldiers, rulers, lepers, persons with diseases and disfigurements, tax collectors, political revolutionaries, Pharisees, Sadducees, men, women and children of all stripes. To anyone who would give him a hearing he offered hope and a life-long encounter with Him.

Intentionally invite Jesus to speak and declare and rejoice in what He says.

“Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live” (Isaiah 55:3a).

God is speaking to us on this first Sunday of 2015.

He is inviting us to encounter him.

He is inviting us to experience him.

He is inviting us to enjoy abundant life.

A Closing Exhortation:

Everybody in this room is somewhere in these four steps I mentioned.

And I call you to take another one this morning.

If you are distant from God, you need to come, draw near.

If you have drawn near in recent days or just this morning, but hold back from any transaction analyzing and appraising, you need to buy. I admit it is a strange transaction: there is no price and you are spiritually bankrupt. But you must take this water and milk and wine, and count it yours just as much as if you had bought it, for there is one who has bought it.

If you have made the transaction and hold the water and milk and wine in your hand, you need to eat. God is not a thing to be studied. He is a person to be experienced. He is food and life and joy for the soul.

Finally, if you have eaten, delight yourself in the Lord. And say with the psalmist, "Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fulness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore."