

AN OPPORTUNITY TO ASSESS...

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalms 63:1-8

1 Cor 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

One of my favorite stories is entitled *"Babette's Feast."* Maybe I love it because I'm part Norwegian, and the tale takes place on a remote windswept coastline in 19th century Norway. It reminds me of coastlines I've been on in Alaska that were north of Nome. Maybe I love it because the author is Danish, and I'm part Danish.

Maybe I love it because two of the main characters in the story are elderly, pious, Protestant sisters - Martine and Philippa (named after Martin Luther and his friend Philip Melancthon) - and their father was a pastor. I fit the elderly Protestant pastor's daughter image since my dad was also a pastor.

Maybe I love it because the story revolves around delicious food, French food to be exact, and we in Hawaii have a special appreciation for amazing food from all over the world.

The sisters' father had founded a church in that isolated area when they were young. But with their father now dead and the strict sect attracting no new converts, the aging sisters preside over a dwindling congregation of elderly believers, who were all becoming hard of hearing and getting more and more on each other's nerves. Although the sisters had been beautiful in their youth and had had many suitors, their father had rejected them all, so the sisters had remained single. I was struck by the scarcity in their lives, the barrenness, the lack of freedom, the lack of joy...

One day a French refugee from Paris (Babette) appears at their door. She gives them a letter from one of their former suitors, explaining that she (Babette) is escaping the bloodshed of the civil war in Paris and recommending her as a housekeeper. The sisters tell her they cannot afford a housekeeper, but Babette offers to work for free. The sisters agree to this, and Babette then serves as their housekeeper and cook for the next decade or so, wonderfully improving their bland meals, slowly gaining their respect.

Babette's only link to her former life is a lottery ticket that a friend in Paris renews for her every year. And amazingly, one year, Babette is notified that she has won the lottery - 10,000 francs. The sisters jump to the conclusion that she will use the money to return to Paris and her lost lifestyle. How surprised they are when Babette asks them if they would let her cook a special meal for the small congregation on the anniversary of the founder's (their father's) 100th birthday. The sisters finally agree to let her do that.

Babette gets right to work on the planning, even taking leave for a few weeks to order supplies and see that they can get to that remote area.

As the food supplies begin to arrive, Martine gets scared. She sees bottles of wine arriving. A boy brings a wheelbarrow with what looks like a huge greenish-black stone in it, but then a snake-like head shoots out of it, and she realizes it is a tortoise, something she has only seen in pictures before. She begins to wonder if they are unknowingly lending their house to a witches' sabbath, and decides to warn her church brothers and sisters. After discussing the situation, they all agree that because Martine and Philippa said okay to Babette's cooking for this celebration out of their good will, they will all still come and eat but will say nothing about the food or drink. They'll just endure it.

The day of the party arrives. As the food and drinks are served, the congregation finds themselves eating and drinking the finest meal they have ever had. As they inwardly enjoy the feasting, their attitudes and hearts begin to be affected by the grace of this gift, and they begin enjoying each other outwardly in ways that hadn't been evidenced for years. Forgiveness flows. Appreciation grows. They begin to lose the adult reserve and by the time they leave they are enjoying each other's company as much if not more than they did when they were kids.

Only after all the guests have left and the sisters realize they haven't thanked Babette yet, do they go to find her in the kitchen, surrounded by tons of dirty pots and dishes. They assume, of course, that she'll want to head back to Paris now and ask her about her plans to leave. Babette says she has no plans to go back because she has no money - which absolutely shocks the sisters.

Then Babette reveals that when she lived in Paris she was the master chef at the famous restaurant there, Cafe Anglais, and a dinner like the one she just cooked for a dozen people would cost 10,000 francs. That's when it begins to dawn on the sisters what a gracious gift they've been given - free to them - but at great cost to someone else.

I sometimes wonder - if a sequel were done to this story - if the sisters' lives would have changed, and if so - how? I wonder if they would have **taken the time to assess** how they wanted to live going forward?

Babette's Feast came to mind when I read the lessons for today, because they all deal in one way or another with taking the time to assess one's life; and that is a practice Lent has long recommended to followers of Jesus. Where am I at? What's going on in my life relationally that is healthy? Unhealthy? With God? With people? Are any changes needed?

Listen to the Message version of today's Isaiah text:

1-5 "Hey there! All who are thirsty,
 come to the water!
Are you penniless?
 Come anyway—buy and eat!
Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk.
 Buy without money—everything's free!
Why do you spend your money on junk food,
 your hard-earned cash on cotton candy?
Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best,
 fill yourself with only the finest.
Pay attention, come close now,
 listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words.
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."

6-7

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.

8-9

"I don't think the way you think.
The way you work isn't the way I work."
God's Decree.
"For as the sky soars high above earth,
so the way I work surpasses the way you work,
and the way I think is beyond the way you think.

We're being called to not miss what God has for us! Listen to God! Receive what God wants to give! What a wonder! It's free! Do we realize that on our own we don't have the resources we desperately need?

Theologian and author Walter Brueggemann notes that here in Isaiah the Israelites - who are finally free from their exile in Babylon - are being asked to **assess** life under the old Empire in Babylon versus the new offer before them of life with Yahweh.

Were they content with life under the Babylonian Empire - where everything was expensive, grudging, unsatisfying, exploitative, coercive, no abundance or joy?

Or does Yahweh's offer of fidelity, faithfulness, flourishing, forgiveness sound like the best invitation? If so, seek God's face. Seek God's presence, God's character, God's gifts.

Our psalm today is a confession of trust in God. The psalmist has **assessed** his life and determined what's important. Again, listen to the Message version:

God—you're my God!
I can't get enough of you!
I've worked up such hunger and thirst for God,
traveling across dry and weary deserts.
2-4
So here I am in the place of worship, eyes open,
drinking in your strength and glory.
In your generous love I am really living at last!
My lips brim praises like fountains.
I bless you every time I take a breath;
My arms wave like banners of praise to you.

5-8

I eat my fill of prime rib and gravy;
I smack my lips. It's time to shout praises!
If I'm sleepless at midnight,
I spend the hours in grateful reflection.
Because you've always stood up for me,
I'm free to run and play.
I hold on to you for dear life,
and you hold me steady as a post.

In Walter Brueggemann's commentary on the psalms, he sees the psalmist as having **assessed** these things as necessary for vitality of life:

the sanctuary
the worshipping community
meditation on God's word
prayer
thanksgiving

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians asks the Corinthians to **assess** the way they're living now that they've become Christians.

Some of them were evidently still attending meals in the temples of the pagan gods, just like they had done before they became Christians. Their thinking was that since there is only one God that they follow in Jesus Christ, the festivities at the pagan temples were just cultural events more than anything else.

So in chapter 8 Paul had asked them to think about weaker members in the faith who might fall back into idol worship by participating in those activities. In chapter 9, Paul shares about how he had surrendered his rights in certain areas for the sake of others.

And now in chapter 10 Paul suggests even another reason to **assess** one's activities. If they're not careful, their own salvation could be in danger. Paul gives examples of the Israelites in the wilderness, how they received sign after sign of God's presence and power. Paul wants the Christians in Corinth to be warned by what happened to others who had experienced God's blessings. Some of them who had been blessed still ended up defying God and as a result were struck down.

In other words, he's telling them don't be overly self-confident. You're capable of messing things up too. Be God-confident. **Assess** how you're living. And know that if you seek God, He won't ever let you down. He won't let you be pushed past your limit.

Finally, turning to Luke, in the previous chapter, chapter 12, Jesus had been talking to his disciples and to enormous crowds about the coming judgment, a righting of what is wrong. Jesus warned them all about hypocrisy, unknowingly living lives more like the Pharisees than like disciples, lives not concerned about following God's plan.

Now in chapter 13, some of those listening to Jesus brought up the tragic situation everyone had heard about - Pilate's slaughter of Galileans - a type of state-sponsored terrorism in that day and age. Since Jesus had brought up the subject of judgment, maybe they were wondering if that tragedy was really God's judgment being meted out on those that were killed, that they were getting what they deserved, that they were worse sinners than other Galileans...

Jesus, seeing where they were going with this, cut that line of thinking off. "No, that did not happen to them because they were worse sinners," he said. "And unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Then Jesus brought up another tragedy - this one a random accident - the Jerusalemites crushed by a falling building. If the people he was in conversation with were also wondering if the victims of that tragedy were perhaps more deserving of the deaths that had come to them than of other people in Jerusalem, the answer was "No, and unless you repent, you will all perish, just as they did."

Have you ever made this kind of assessment: calamity strikes in your life and you jump to the thought - "I wonder what I did to deserve this?"

Have you heard people say that disaster comes to those who deserve it?

Scripture does say that judgment will come to the disobedient. In Psalm 1: the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

But, as one of my Fuller professors, Joel Green, said, "That is not the same thing as arguing that disasters come only to those who are disobedient." He notes that Jesus' reply does not deny that sin has consequences, nor that sin leads to judgment. What he **is rejecting** is the notion that if calamity hits one's life, it means that person is more deserving of judgment than someone who has been fortunate enough to avoid calamity so far. Wrong thinking! Judgment is coming to all eventually, no matter who or where they are, unless there is repentance.

Doesn't that sound kind of harsh? Jesus, really! Repent or perish?

But if someone comes with a blunt message that is meant to save you, isn't that being kind, rather than hostile?

What if, for instance, it was confirmed that a tsunami was going to hit the south shore of Oahu. Do you think emergency workers and announcers would get much movement if they said, "you know, you might want to think about an eventual evacuation, you know, give it some thought!" But if one hears, "you have to gather your essential things and get out of here **now** with your loved ones," that would get me moving.

Jesus was communicating, "I want you to live." The message was terse, meant to awaken people to the gravity of the situation.

Then Jesus told the parable of the fig tree, which is where we hear good news in this text. We have a God who wants us to live and bear fruit. We have a God who is beyond patient with us. We have a God who has mercy toward us. We who are still alive have been given time to **assess** if and how we are heeding the words of Jesus: to repent and live and bear fruit.

A man, Jesus said, had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it, and found none. So he said to the gardener, "For three years I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"

The gardener replied, "Let it alone for one more year, sir, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year as a result, well and good! If not, you can cut it down."

The barren fig tree is being given more time. It has a window of opportunity.

Lent reminds us who desire to follow Jesus, that this is a good time to **assess** our lives. Let this Lenten season be a time of repentance, where we open ourselves up to God. *"Come in and help me see myself as you see me," we can pray. We can pray, "Lord, I hand over to you any pretense in my life, the image management I do, the manipulation I'm so good at, my control issues, the ways I'm so obsessed with myself. I can't fix myself. But you can. Your Holy Spirit can pierce my defenses, can move me to where I see I need forgiveness.*

You are willing to dig around in my soil and fertilize me, like the gardener would do for the fig tree. Have at it, Lord!"

And then, the beauty of the story is that repentance holds forth the hope that fruit can come forth and will benefit the owner and the owner's kingdom.

We are all the fig tree. Thanks be to God for God's commitment to our flourishing!