

Pastor's Message – 3/20/2022  
Isaiah 55:1-9

There has been more and more emphasis on preventative health care these days: building a life-style and personal practices to help people stay healthy. In fact, my health insurance company actually provides “health coaches” who call me periodically to ask how I’m doing and how I’m doing with my health goals. Coaching can help when we have a goal we’re shooting for – help us to set goals and to keep goals.

Today in our Bible reading from Isaiah we hear about another kind of health coach. Isaiah tells us that health coaching for the soul is as helpful and necessary as the coaching one might get from an insurance company for physical or mental health, except in the case of spiritual coaching we’re not trying to cut down, but rather trying to fill up on God's spirit and provision for our lives.

Through the prophet Isaiah today, God speaks to the exiled people of Judah through the prophet Isaiah in a way that sounds a lot like a health coach calling a suffering patient. God is advising them on strategies that will restore their spiritual health and relationships with God as he prepares to lead them back from exile in Babylon. The people have long been dehydrated and starving as the consequence of their sin and banishment to a foreign land. Now God gives them some nutrition counseling about how to be nourished again.

"Everyone thirsting, come to the waters," the Coach begins. In chapter 8, God has already told Isaiah that one of the reasons that the people's health is so bad is that they refused to drink "the waters of Shiloah" (8:5) -- a reference to a canal along the eastern slope of Jerusalem that some scholars have connected to the Pool of Siloam (John 9:7). These waters seem to represent the sustaining strength of God for his people, but they rejected it and chose to run thirsty. As a result, all they would receive is the "mighty flood" of foreign invasion instead (8:7). And yet, as God promised to Noah during another catastrophic flood, God would still sustain and be with them (54:9-10). God now invites his thirsty people to "come to the waters" and drink deeply, once again, of God's love for them.

Spiritual dryness can become a chronic condition for the people of God if they do not come to the "living water" and drink deeply on a regular basis (John 4). As any health coach will tell you, drinking at least eight, 8-ounce glasses of water a day will benefit you a great deal. Regular and sustained

disciplines of prayer and engagement with God's word will also sustain the thirsty soul. God invites us, as he invited the people of Judah, to come and drink deeply and be refreshed by his love and his promises.

The Health Coach, then goes on to talk about diet. Obesity is most prevalent among the poor because unhealthy, processed foods are cheaper and easier to prepare. God urges people to get off the fast, cheap and easy spiritual diet and instead come to the free and abundant banquet he offers through his grace. This isn't food you have to work to be able to afford, but rather the gift of a gracious host (55:1). Indeed, the Health Coach identifies the problem with the people's health: They are spending their money on cheap, undernourished alternatives and working hard to sustain a spiritual diet that won't satisfy them (55:2).

Historically speaking, the Assyrian invasion (a precursor to the Babylonians,) led the people to hard times when there was plenty of milk and honey, but little else (7:22-24).

Spiritually speaking, in chapter 55, they were nearly starving on the diet of slavery in Babylon when the Health Coach says to them, "Listen to me, let my words guide you, and you'll be feasting, full of good life (55:2)." That "food" is the richness of God's own word and promise based on God's covenant with David (55:3). As rain comes to the earth and brings forth seeds that lead to bread, so God's word goes out and sustains his people if only they will come and eat. It's a word that is never "empty" but always accomplishes God's purpose (55:10-11).

God urges us to change our diets, too. So much of our diet, both physically and spiritually, comes packaged as sugary-sweet and enticing empty calories, whether it's on the shelf at the grocery store, apps, or streaming services. We grow fatter, dumber and sadder the more we consume the junk of our culture. God, the ultimate Health Coach, urges us instead to fill up on bread that sustains -- the Bread of Life, as Jesus called himself in John 6, the manna from God that is there to nourish us daily. That bread enables us not only to be healthy, but to help others as well as assistant spiritual health coaches. Jesus once said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work" (John 4:34). We should embrace the same diet!

If we're going to make that change, however, we know that we will do better if we don't try to make it on our own. We need our fellow Christians to help us in community, and we need to embrace God's offer to coach us through prayer as we make the change: "Seek the Lord while he may be

found, call upon him while he is near ..." (55:6).

God is, after all, the expert whose "thoughts are not [our] thoughts, nor are [our] ways [his] ways" (55:8). If we're going to be healthy Christians, we need a Coach who knows the best way to make us whole!

I can choose to work with my health coach; they aren't going to push. I can even tell them I don't want them to call me. But God doesn't take no for an answer. God is a little pushy. God is faithful. Listen to the "pushy" words in our reading again; these words are simplified healthy coaching advice.

"Come," God says. God sets the table, but we have to pull up the chair. A follower of Jesus has to respond to God's faithfulness by choosing to take action.

"Buy," God says. Or buy into. Commit. Take the step, the leap, the plunge.

"Eat" (v. 1). Partake. Experience. Taste. Savor the goodness of God.

"Listen" (v. 2). Pay attention. Discriminate. Be attuned to the voice of God, and tune out competing voices — whether cultural, secular or the voice of entertainment and peers.

"Hear me" (v. 3). Fix your spiritual state of mind so that the voice of God can be heard. Get rid of the noise and interference that can drown out the voice of God. Dig out the spiritual earwax that reduces the voice of God to a muffle.

"Seek the LORD while he may be found" (v. 6). Pursue single-mindedly, search diligently for. Make the presence of God a priority. Take advantage of the opportunities to walk with God while you still have them.

"Forsake" (v. 7). Abandon whatever doesn't work for your relationship with God. Decide what is holding you back, and let these things go.

"Return to" (v. 7). After letting go of the bad, grab the good. Turn to what is right, good and positive. Turn to God for forgiveness and mercy.

God knows that we search for meaning – search for a purpose for our lives. This is nothing new. So, God speaks through Isaiah to all who are thirsting for that mysterious something "more" in life that will nourish us in ways that good and money cannot buy. God's invitation to abundant life includes mercy, forgiveness and a relationship with God Himself.

Everybody knows that Church attendance and participation is dropping off, but still people come. There is something in church that feeds the soul.

Church is one of the most hopeful public experiences of life. People still come. They've got all kinds of things they could be doing with their time -- but they are here. This is where our hope is, individually and collectively.

As we prayed in our Call to Worship today, "Like someone stranded in the desert looking for water, let us seek the LORD." That's why people come – to find something holy: life-giving water. But we have to come for more than a warm and fuzzy spirituality. Warm fuzzies may be attractive to some, but without commitment and without true worship of a great God, the church dies. It's easy to preach "feel-good" messages, but I believe people need something to chew on – something that is more than empty calories to be healthy.

That's why Lent is still important. The idea of coming to a feast with fresh milk and sweet wine, food which we do not have to pay for, may seem contrary to what Lent is all about, but it defines beautifully what Christians really mean by repentance. Repentance is more than turning away from paths of sin. Repentance, ultimately, means turning toward and walking upon the path of life, a path that ends in fullness of life now, and, in the age to come, resurrection, and new creation.

So today as we listen to God, our spiritual health coach, we turn toward the feast and come for the good stuff. But there may be little time. "This very night," it says in Luke 12.20, "your life is being demanded of you." Seek the LORD while He may be found. There is an urgency in Isaiah's message for us today.

And while we may have salvation now, while we may have relationship with God today, there are still some who will turn away and reject God's offer of mercy and forgiveness. That relationship with God can be lost. You may be familiar with the Bible story of the Prodigal Son and next week we'll be talking about that story. The Prodigal Son shared everything that the father had and threw it all away. "Come – stay," God says.

You may feel trapped or bogged down in your spiritual life, but God's promise still reaches out to you. God's victory song is sung; Jesus has defeated sin and death. God, in grace, offers us the free gifts of God's blessings. God gives us the priceless food for our Spirit. God's wisdom, higher than our wisdom, plants the seed of hope in the cracks that break throughout our hard hearts. God promises us, when we turn back to God, the feast that celebrates God's love and restoration.