

“Near and Far”

Isaiah 55 & Psalm 63

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Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson –

‘Near’ and ‘far’ – that’s what I’d like us to pay attention to today, as I focus on this Isaiah 55 passage. In Isaiah 55, the near and far has to do with God: at one point it says that God is near; but then the last verses indicate some sort of distance, farness about God (and I want you to know that I discovered this week that ‘farness’ is indeed a word! – it means to be distant or remote – so I’m going to use the word farness!)

You can also notice as we sing Psalm 63 that there, near and far has to do with the Psalmist: in the opening verse the Psalmist expresses a distance from God that is like thirst in the desert; then the rest of the Psalm tells how the Psalmist feels near to God.

One other thing about near and far – Isaiah 55 is written to the people of Israel who had been defeated and taken into exile in Babylon – they are far, far from home – how will they ever be near again? Near to God or back to home...? So near and far are both the content and the setting of this passage – Isaiah 55.

When it comes to near or far, it seems that near is usually the favored option – at least that’s how we’ve heard it so far with Isaiah 55 and Psalm 63 – near is better than far. I realize that in life in general, whether near or far is good depends entirely on the circumstances – when someone is holding a sign that says ‘The End is Near’, it’s meant to be ominous, not pleasant, and in that case you might prefer the end to be far instead. Mostly there’s just a

preference for being near the things we like, and far from the things we don't. And in the Bible, God is clearly meant to be in the 'things we like' category, so the overwhelming preference is for God to be near – it's what we hear about all the time: either the affirmation of a faith that abides in God's presence, God's nearness; or a longing for God's presence in times of particular need, when God seems far away.

When it comes to God, near is good, far is bad.

Now I want to tell you something I'd like to do today – which is to look at how with God, maybe near isn't always so good - that near could be bad; and that in fact 'far' could be good. And I want to tell you that up front, because I don't want you to think I'm trying to be too clever or too tricky about things - we all know that 'God is near' is good, and I want to talk about that; but I have also been thinking about some problems that can happen with 'God is near' and some important things there could be to hear about 'God is far' – so that's what I want to look at that with you too.

We all know that 'God is near' is good because it has to do with expressing a relationship with God that is good – a relationship that is substantive, life-giving, strong. You quickly realize that although near is a proximity word, a spatial word, that what 'near' is really trying to convey is that reality of connection, of relationship. We use those kinds of words as images in relationships – when you say 'I feel close to you', it's not so much a proximity word as it is an expression of connection, of being linked together. 'God is near' conveys a sense of God's presence in the midst of life as the source of meaning and guidance; 'you are near to God' expresses a relationship with God and following God's ways.

Near is to know the love of God and to love God.

And so then ‘far’ is about that relationship gone wrong – and although at times it literally feels like God is far away, it’s about more than location: ‘far’ gives voice to the reality of how circumstances challenge our relationship with God – circumstances of suffering, of sin, of struggle, of doubt – each its own kind of distance, farness from God. ‘Where is God?’ has to do with ‘far’. In a relationship with God – near is good and far is not.

So then, how could near be bad? Well, it turns out that near becomes a problem when it actually IS focused on location, proximity, rather than on relationship – when ‘God is near’ starts to become making God into a possession, God as a trump card you carry, the presence that speaks of your prominence, your importance. It’s a problem when ‘God is near’ assumes and requires that God is far from others.

I had the privilege to hear Dr. Walter Brueggemann speak this week at Western Seminary – he is a prominent and prolific and profound Old Testament scholar. He focused on the prophet Jeremiah, but much of what he said connects to themes in all of the Old Testament prophets, including Isaiah. And central to Brueggemann’s work is the understanding that the leadership of Israel had come to see their chosenness as God’s people as entitlement rather than gift – as status rather than as calling. God existed to perpetuate their existence – and ‘near’ was very much about location – there in Israel, and especially in Jerusalem; that’s where God was and it was God’s job to keep them and Jerusalem safe.

And when leaders and a people get the idea that it’s all about how important you are rather than who God is, it’s a recipe guaranteed to come out wrong. The focus turns from following God’s word to perpetuating power; from a focus on faithfulness to a focus on security. Relationship with God is twisted around into the assumption that God is on your side. And that leads to

Israel getting involved in every sort of social and political and religious and moral waywardness - God's not happy about that - things begin to fall apart.

And all of that is precisely the context of Isaiah 55 – these words were written to a people who had thought they were guaranteed to live as the chosen ones in Jerusalem forever, and instead they found themselves defeated and in exile in Babylon. And although you can point to all the responsibility that these people of Israel have for the missteps that lead to this devastating situation – the fact remains that it was a bitter experience, a disaster in which they have gone from a misguided faith to now a crisis of faith: is there reason or possibility for any faith at all? They are far from home, far from God, far from hope, far from any sense of being God's people – far from relationship.

We need to ponder, to wonder, to confess, how much this might be our context as well today. The Church is a place that always has to face the temptation of making itself into the exclusive location of God – 'God is near only here'; there is always the danger of the Church seeing itself as having exclusive rights to God's nearness. That view of 'near' leads to bad things – a focus on the church's power rather than God's kingdom; a focus on perpetuating the church's existence rather than serving God. That problem has been and always will be an issue for the Church – and if we're honest I think we'll see the repercussions that come from it: a loss of faith in the church, the division of the church, the irrelevance of the church. It leaves many who wonder if there is any reason or possibility for faith at all.

Sometimes a nation must face the temptation of making itself into the exclusive location of God – Israel back then, perhaps Israel now as well. And our nation, the United States has as part of its history and a continuing strand of our identity the idea of having a special privilege of God's blessing, sometimes specifically as a Christian nation. Other nations and peoples too

claim that same mantle of being the most important - whether Christian or Muslim or secular. And when those attitudes are the starting point for action, it's a problem – it's the point which seeks a path to power and prominence and prosperity over integrity and accountability and responsibility. It is a path that can certainly lead to greatness – to super power; but at some point the weak foundation gives way. You and I can talk about what kind of crisis that points to now, or in the past, or ahead – but the prophets say this way of being cannot last – so then is there any other way to be, or just the crumbling?

In all those situations the 'nearness' of God in one way or another has to do with this sense of privilege and location and possession of God – and when that is threatened or questioned it's a crisis because then God must be far or not be at all. So that's why I want to listen to the farness of God in a different way, as a pathway to hope. Isaiah 55:8-9...

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 thought higher than your thoughts.

What does that mean? I've always thought of it as some expression of the distance and incomprehensibility of God – the mystery of God – the otherness of God - and I suppose there is something of that there. But I've been thinking this week that it has to do mostly with the essence of God... these words of God follow right after it says to come to God because God is near and that God shows mercy abundantly; and this follows images of abundance – of free food and a feast that truly satisfies. It's after all these 'near' words and images, that we hear this 'far' image that God is above and beyond us. So what if the 'farness' of God is about this: that we can never fully grasp the breadth and depth and height of God's grace – the 'farness' of

God is that it is the lifelong calling, challenge, blessing of faith to keep journeying deeper into God's infinite grace and mercy – never fully comprehending it and certainly never controlling or containing or possessing it, but abiding in it as the reality all around us.

This farness of God's ways of grace is what teaches us what near is about – we need far to understand near: Near is not possession of God, it is the truth of God's mercy and grace for all; near is not status, it is revelation that God's law and truth is way of life for all people. Those ways of God's grace so far beyond us keep us from the pitfalls of making 'near' into our own private club – and once we hear and see and confess those pitfalls, we can turn not to despair but hope: we hear that God's ways are far beyond us not because God is distant/inaccessible, but because we are able to turn from what is deadly and receive new expressions of God's grace in us and around us.

With that in mind, I want to say three last things about near and far for us to ponder:

* the words on the bulletin cover – and this art, this image in the sanctuary... there is great comfort in those words for us; there is great need for shelter for us in God's presence; 'near' is something we need from and are given by God. But there is also a question in the words and image: do we hear the 'near' that is spoken just for us?; who else needs to be near?; where else needs to be near?; how do we need to hear the 'farness', the immensity, of God's grace calling the truth of 'near' to others?

* Wednesday night at the Lenten Bible Study we heard and reflected on these Scriptures – and the images of food and feast and being satisfied were heard throughout these passages. In some ways they are all beautiful spiritual images, but what I heard from that group too is that these images speak very

much to the physical needs of the world around us as well. There is no integrity for us in our time to speak of being near to God without also caring about food and water and shelter for those in need around us. The 'farness' of God's grace calls us to share our food and drink as well.

* And the last thing: in this season of Lent we move toward Holy Week as the culmination of the story of Jesus. Jesus Christ we can see as the ultimate expression of the nearness of God – coming to us in the flesh, in our humanity and history. And yet is it precisely in Jesus Christ that we also see the farness of God – for never could we conceive of or anticipate a love so great as to embrace this world with such grace. In the nearness of Christ we see how God's grace is always far beyond our imagining.

Near – far – it is all God's grace.

AMEN.