



## Grocery Shopping with God

Isaiah 55:1-5

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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We've finished our worship series on John Wesley's sermons, but as Wesley is the one who laid the framework for the theological foundation of our denomination, it's safe to say we still have a lot to learn from his deep thinking on Biblical truths. One of the tenants Wesley believed, and that we still maintain today in the Methodist Church, is that the Bible contains every bit of information necessary to receive salvation. The Latin phrase for this belief is called, *Sola Scriptura*. Literally translated, it means, "only scripture." Fully defined, this tenant claims that everything you need to know to receive salvation lies in the scriptural texts.

I agree with Wesley and the many church patriarchs before him who lifted up the text of the Bible as that which is the most instructional regarding salvation and eternal life in the glory of God's realm. However, for the Biblical text to truly be helpful in our understanding of salvation and the saving work of God, it requires us to have an understanding of the text that goes deeper than what a simple surface level reading can provide. Today's text is a good example of how a surface reading lacks in instruction, and how a deeper reading can help us understand the call to faithfulness more fully.

The text opens with this exclamation designed to get the reader's attention, 'Ho!' As if in a market square, and one of the market tenants sees you walking by and calls out to you, "Hey you – look over here!" It reeks of the kiosk stands in the mall where each person you pass swears they have what you want and need. You know the ones I'm talking about: "Hey there young woman! Want to smell better? Try my perfume!" Or, "Hey there old man, do you have an anniversary this week? Don't forget to get your wife the best gift – come check out my jewelry!"

The text opens with someone promising they have what you need, "Ho – are you thirsty? Come over and have some of my water. Are you broke? No worries, I'm giving away food, wine and milk at no cost!"

The invitation is enticing. Food, milk, and wine at no cost? I don't know that I need the milk and food, but, wine, at no cost? I just hope it's not cheap wine.

But it is here that our modern day reading of this text starts to break down. In large part – though certainly not universally – we read this text as a nation and culture in which the invitation to free food is nothing but a whimsical offer. I'm not saying we aren't all excited about an opportunity for free stuff. But the free food we receive is rarely more than the joy of going to Trader Joes or Costco on sample day. And who doesn't enjoy taking advantage of the free teriyaki or orange chicken samples in the mall food court?

When we hear the invitation to come and have bread or milk or wine for no price, we rarely go out of our way to receive the free gifts because in large part, we are already filled past

satiation. We are a nation that claims one of the worst obesity problems in all the world. We have one of the highest cholesterol problems of any nation. We throw away enough food every week to satisfy the hunger epidemic in most 3<sup>rd</sup> world nations. The invitation to free food doesn't always spark our interest.

I was talking to someone who was visiting from Sudan a few years ago. He said the first time he was here in America, his host family, wanting to treat him well, took him out to dinner at a nice restaurant. They asked him if he wanted an appetizer. He had never heard of an appetizer before. It was described to him as the food that came before the meal. After the appetizer he was invited to have a soup or salad. Again, he inquired if this was the dinner. And again, it was explained that after the appetizer there was a soup or salad before the main course. Then the dinner came. After dinner was over, he was asked if he wanted a dessert. Again, he had never heard of dessert. He joked with me, saying, he wasn't sure what to call dessert. He described it as the food that came after the food, that came after the food, that came after the food. "Where I come from," he said, "this was more food than most people would consume in a full day; and here, we ate it all at one sitting."

And this is why the context of the scripture matters. The invitation for free food and wine in this text is not being offered to people who are filled beyond content. This call and offer is being made to a people who have been living in exile. The Israelites had been living in Babylon, away from their homeland, with few jobs and even less resources. They had suffered in a land where they were considered less than equal citizens. They had lived as unwelcome immigrants, with the poorest of jobs, and unequal voices. They scrounged together food, rarely enjoying such luxuries as wine. They had little money, and had even less confidence life would ever get better.

Surely there are people in the world today who share in this kind of pain of lacking of necessary resources. Surely there are folks, even here in our own community, who do not know where their next meal will come from. Surely there are refugees living in our midst who, for fear of their own lives, fled their homeland and now live in exile. For any such person, perhaps the invitation to receive free food and milk is heard with great anticipation.

What's better ... the invitation to these hungry and exiled persons isn't just to receive a temporary supply of food. The promise is far greater than a fleeting meal. The prophet calls them, "Why do you spend your money for that which isn't bread, and why do you labor in ways that do not satisfy? Listen to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Listen to me, that you may have life. ... I will make with you an everlasting covenant."

Whoa, what? You're not just offering a free meal, but you're going to make an everlasting covenant? You'll continue to provide? The isn't just a temporary meal – but is an invitation to receive what I'll need for weeks, months, and years to come?

The author goes on to say, that you'll be given so much that even other nations who do not know you will run to you! People will seek your help because you have been glorified by the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel.

Think of the promise and the invitation that is being offered. To a people in exile – to the hungry, the lost, the unemployed, the poor, the immigrants, the unsure, the anxious, and the tired – to a people who just want to return home, the prophet says, God will give you everything you need to be satisfied and more. You'll receive even beyond what you need, you'll receive enough that others will come to you when they are in need, and you'll have enough excess to give to them.

To a people who are so over indulged in food that not only do many of us not look for free food, but we at times intentionally and actively avoid the free food days at the store because we don't want to deal with the kind of people that flock to sample day. Not to mention, the invitation to free food and abundance might seem like a false or uninviting hope. The question we must ask ourselves to understand the will of God and the promise of salvation this text is offering is, "What are we lacking?" What is it that we are working so hard to get? For those who are working 50, 60, 70, and even 80 hour weeks, what are you hoping you'll find in all those extra work hours? For those who lacking purpose and love in relationships, for those looking in other people to find what you aren't finding in the people around you, what is it you're looking for? For those looking at job transitions and new employment opportunities, what is missing in your current situation? What are you lacking in the workplace? For those looking for new homes or a new place to live, what is missing in your current place?

Are you looking for happiness? Are you looking for a sense of adventure? Are you looking for a hopeful future? Are you looking for financial independence? Are you looking for excitement? Are you looking for stability? Are you looking for an increase in your 401k? Are you looking for a promise that tomorrow will be better than today?

As the world becomes increasingly electronic in nature, our capability to fulfill wants has become much easier. We merely type in a simple address like amazon.com, and we have more material items at our fingertips than ever before. Supermarkets and brick-and-mortar stores can only stare in the mirror at their best days. Stores are forced into an amazon mentality to attract customers, offering grocery items, clothing, toys, auto-parts, home goods, furniture, and pharmaceutical goods all in one place.

Imagine the grandest of super markets, only instead of just offer the tangible goods like a Super Walmart or Tar-get, this market offered the intangible as well. There would be a section for "love," a section for "self-worth," a section for "knowledge," a section for "family values," and a section for "hope." You can find literally anything you want in this space. As you're wandering around, you find that it's sample day. You hear someone yelling at you. It's the divine voice yelling out at you as you are wandering down the aisles. In your state of hopeless wandering – a state we all know too well from wandering up and down the aisles of a superstore – the voice yells at you, "Ho! Look here! Listen up! Come over! Come see! Ho!"

You've created for yourself this unrealistic hope that on your own, through you own work, through your own shopping, through your own effort you can acquire and accomplish all that you need to satisfy yourself. And yet, you're wandering aimlessly, now wondering, will I ever find my purpose or the path for a better future?

The divine seller calls to you, beckoning for you to hear, “Ho! You need not bring anything here to buy or acquire what I have to offer. Just come! Why do you waste your energy trying to provide for yourself that which does not satisfy? Why do you keep trying to indulge in the fleeting moments instead of reveling in the eternal promise? Listen to me! I have what is good; I have what will provide you with true life!”

*Sola Scriptura* – all you need is the text to understand the promise of God for your salvation. Don’t settle for a shallow understanding that says God doesn’t have what you need simply because you are already too well fed. The promise of this text is that no matter what you are searching for, no matter what you feel you’re lacking, God calls you to see the Holy One as the eternal provider. You can be satisfied, if you only look to the one who satisfies, instead of the world who sets you up to keep wanting more.

And don’t miss the invitation and the promise of salvation. The Lord doesn’t promise to just appease your needs. The promise of the Lord is that you will not only be fulfilled with all you need, but that your cup will overflow, such that you can share from your abundance to take part in the work of God to fulfill everyone. “To enter into [the] everlasting covenant is to become in turn part of a divine sales force, offering to others gravely and gratefully that which has been so generously given, a life anchored in the love and mercy of a living God.”<sup>i</sup> At it’s rawest form, the promise of salvation is followed up with the invitation to evangelism. You aren’t invited to force others to know God through compulsion, but, being filled with all you need for true life, you are invited to engage in the sharing of God’s love with others as a process of experiencing and sharing the glorious gifts that have been so generously given to you.<sup>ii</sup>

At the core of this passage and the promise of salvation it offers is the foundation for the mission of our church. We believe God is love, and because we are fulfilled and overflowing with the love of God, we are making a place for everyone to know that love.

So listen up – and hear the Word of the Lord! Ho! Hear the eternal promise of God’s great covenant. For all who are hungry, and tired; for those searching for a promise and a hope in life; for those hurting because of your shortfalls; for those questioning the meaning of life; for those unsure of your worth in the world; for those anxious of your calling by the Lord Almighty; for all who are weary or just plain exhausted; for those who think more highly of yourself than you should; for those who have egos as large as your wealth; **everybody** stop and listen! Hear the eternal promise – you can stop searching! You can stop wandering! You can stop trying to be greater than you are! Rest assured that the promise of God does not fail. You are called and claimed! You are chosen and loved! You are invited and welcomed! Your purpose has already been defined! You are invited to join the glory of the Lord, to take part in ensuring the love of God is shared with everyone.

So rejoice, and celebrate in the great love of God, that calls you, claims you, redeems you, sustains you, and invites you to share in the work of God that all may know the love of the Lord. Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Wendel W. Meyer. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.