

SERMON TITLE: "The Tree of Life: God's Satisfying Joy"
SERMON TEXT: Isaiah 55:1-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 22, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago, there was an article in *The Salt Lake Tribune* about the new worship center for the St. Anna Greek Orthodox Church. Some time back, the Salt Lake City congregation decided that they needed a bigger building. Instead of constructing from scratch or buying an existing church building from another denomination, the St. Anna Greek Orthodox congregation decided to buy a building that had previously housed the Western Garden and Atrium. Then the congregation began transforming that retail establishment. First, they added a bell tower and two crosses to the roof. Next, they installed a mosaic icon from Italy on the side of the building. After that, they employed Greek artisans to paint, or "write," Byzantine iconography on the walls and ceiling of the inner sanctuary. By doing all this, the St. Anna Greek Orthodox congregation has created a sacred worship space and joyfully given new life to a store that formerly sold seeds, plants, and trees.

Last Sunday, we began a series of sermons and stewardship talks on the theme of "The Tree of Life." "Thank you!" to Ray Christian for his good talk last week and to Peggy Carr for hers today! "Thanks!" also to Jay & Chris Hansell for obtaining this Flame Maple tree we have here in the sanctuary to help focus our attention. Our plan is that we will plant this tree out in the church yard after worship on Sunday, November 5th. That's the day we're asking all of you to bring back your completed pledge cards that you probably received in the mail on Friday or Saturday. Our November 5th celebration will also include a potluck lunch. It will be a festive and joyful time.

And that's exactly what I want to talk about with you today. Last Sunday, we discussed how the tree of life demonstrates God's precious wisdom. Today, let's look at Isaiah 55, and see how the tree of life shows us God's satisfying joy.

1—WE'RE ALL THIRSTY AND HUNGRY

The first thing we see in this chapter from Isaiah is that it begins with a statement about reality: Every one of us gets thirsty, and every one of us gets hungry. There's no one alive who doesn't need material sustenance of bread, water, and milk. I can't say that wine is a necessity today, but maybe it was back in Isaiah's day when there was no other way to preserve liquids. The people who live in Gaza certainly are suffering from a lack of basic food and drink. The same is true in parts of Ukraine and other war zones. In Cuba, Venezuela, and other failed states, people don't have nearly enough to eat. And, all over the world, people are dying from lack of clean water. Even we who have so very much here in the United States require basic elements to sustain our life.

And we've all felt the pinch of those basic goods lately, haven't we? Fortunately, inflation on food isn't as bad now as it was a year ago when bird flu caused eggs to be exorbitantly priced. But our memories of COVID supply-chain disruptions and the on-going rise in rent and mortgage interest rates continue to cause us anxiety. We can't help but wonder if our cost-of-living adjustments will actually keep pace with the increasing costs of healthcare and utilities. We who live in material bodies and need material goods are keenly aware of the cost of those necessities.

That's the reality. But there's also a question and an invitation here in these first several verses of Isaiah 55. Are we spending our money on what we truly need, or have we been buying junk food that doesn't satisfy? Have we been wasting our labor, or do we work for what actually brings us joy? Do we delight ourselves in the goodness that God offers to us? Do we invest our money and efforts in God's everlasting covenant? Will we participate in God's grand plan to spread peace and joy to the nations of the world? Will we allow God to be glorified in and through us?

This section of Isaiah was written as a challenge of hope to the Jewish people. Because of sins and mistakes their people had made in the past, Jerusalem had been destroyed, and their parents and grandparents had been taken into captivity in Babylon. The people in their family tree had experienced

horrific suffering. But that trauma was over, and now it was time to return to the Jewish homeland. God was asking the people if they were ready to embrace this hopeful and positive new life. Would they be willing to let go of their dependence on material things that didn't satisfy? Would they be willing to uproot from their life in Babylon? Would they instead be willing to trust God with their future and be transplanted to the Jewish homeland? If so, Israel would become a witness to the world. They would glorify God as a beacon of peace and joy. They would once again become a tree of life.

2—GOD'S THOUGHTS & WAYS ARE DIFFERENT FROM OURS

In Isaiah 55, verse eight, we see another reality. God's thoughts and ways are not the same as our human thoughts and ways. God has a much higher perspective. Because God is eternal, God can see past, present, and future all at once. For good reason, we mortal humans often get caught up in the pain and suffering of our time. How can we not feel negative and scared when we see warring in the Middle East? Our stewardship theme reminds me of the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, where a gunman killed 11 worshipers five years ago this month. There's a lot wrong in our world. And most of us are aware of problems and troubles even in our own families. So, it's natural that we would get emotionally wrapped up in the drama of our days and feel insecure.

But our everlasting God can see that life goes on much past our personal and even societal crises. As we read in verse 10, God causes the rain and snow to come down and water the earth. Even if the rain and snow might come with the fury of torrents, floods, hurricanes, and blizzards—overall, God's essential moisture benefits the earth. And that moisture allows the seeds to sprout and grow into produce from which we are able to eat.

Of course, God's activity in the world isn't just to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eater. As we see in verse 11, God's high-level thoughts and heavenly ways are expressed by a word of hope and power that goes forth to accomplish God's purpose. And God's word invites us to respond. If we back up to verses six and seven, we see the way to do this. "Seek the Lord while he may be found,

call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and [return] to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” God has sent out the divine word of invitation. All we must do is respond to this offer to participate in God’s joyful tree of abundant life.

3—YOU WILL GO OUT IN JOY

And that leads us to the final section of Isaiah 55. In verses 12 and 13, we see the promise that God’s satisfying joy is bursting forth as the tree of life. As the prophet called the Jewish people to leave the familiarity of their Babylonian captivity and return to their home in Israel, he painted this picture:

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

In Isaiah’s imagery of the future, the painful thorns and briars which the people had been experiencing would be replaced by cypress and myrtle trees. The contrast in beauty and usefulness was incredible, and these trees of life would be an everlasting memorial and sign of God’s satisfying joy.

This invitation to participate in God’s abundant and joyful life wasn’t only for the Jewish people long ago. This invitation also speaks to us today: Quit spending your money on what doesn’t satisfy. Invest your money and energy in what is eternal. Invest in the grand vision and hopeful future that God offers. This divine vision may seem different from your reality, but that’s because God has a better view than we do. God can see what’s ahead. And when we invest in this way of God, we will receive far more than seeds and bread. We will find everlasting joy for our souls.

One of our communion hymns puts it this way: “I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved, and free.”¹ Another communion hymn prays to God, “You satisfy the hungry heart with gift of finest wheat. Come, give to us, O saving Lord, the bread of life to eat.”²

As Isaiah writes in verse one, these divine blessings of joy come to us without price from our God who loves us. God’s peace and mercy are freely given. The richness of God’s bounty is an

extravagant gift because there's no way we could even begin to buy our way into the tree of life. But we also know that even the greatest blessings in life are only available to those who pay attention to them. And one of the ways that we humans pay attention to anything is to respond to it with our gratitude, our time, and our money. What we invest in is what we will notice and care about. What we invest in is where we will be. Who we invest in is who we will be with.

Isaiah wasn't asking Jews to leave Babylon and return to Israel individually. He was asking them to do this thing together. Similarly, while each of us must make our own decisions about our pledges and contributions to the ministry of this church, this invitation to God's satisfying joy—this invitation to be roots, branches, and leaves on God's tree of life—is for all of us together.

So, the question is this: Will you take part in this grand adventure? Will you uproot yourself from things that don't satisfy and trust in God's vision of the future? Will you let go of the things of Babylon? Will you allow God to free you from the stickery thorns and thistles that entangle you? On November 5th, when we come forward with our 2024 pledge cards and place them on or under the tree of life, will you be part of that joyful procession? I hope so!

CONCLUSION

Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
 hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.
 Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blest,
 well-spring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest!
 Field and forest, vale and mountain, flowery meadow, flashing sea,
 chanting bird and flowing fountain, call us to rejoice in thee.³

Let us celebrate God's satisfying joy found in the tree of life!

¹"I Come with Joy," by Brian Wren, 1968, c. 1971 Hope Publ. Co.

²"You Satisfy the Hungry Heart," by Omer Westendorft, 1977, c. 1977 Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

³"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," by Henry Van Dyke, 1907.