

Alternative to “the Bread of Affliction”

Isaiah 55

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I want to tell you about a biblical phrase, “the bread of affliction.” The phrase refers to a social condition in which you eat your bread and live your life under great pressure, because there are deep demands on you, quotas to fill, deadlines to meet that may break your heart or your back (see Deut. 16:3, Isaiah 30:20). That pressure may sour your taste for bread and squeeze your life into despair.

I.

In our text in Isaiah the Israelites are exiled into Babylon. They are displaced persons under duress. They are outsiders who must hustle to measure up, who will never be good enough to be accepted. Their lives were bitter and their bread was tasteless in their mouths. They had to live a life they did not want to live under the pressure of Babylonian power, and Babylonian culture, and Babylonians expectations that were uncompromising.

These displaced Israelites were no strangers to the bread of affliction. They could remember all the way back to the days of slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh. Pharaoh imposed heavy demands on them, making more bricks while they had to gather their own straw. Their lives back then were bitter and hopeless, and the bread they ate tasted like cardboard at best.

Or if we fast-forward from Babylon, later on the Jews under the Roman Empire ate the bread of affliction. Their land was occupied by Roman soldiers and Roman tax collectors, and their cultural, religious identity as Jews was under assault. It is no wonder that they lost their appetite for the bread of affliction served up by Rome.

It turns out that the story of God’s people is a story of the bread of affliction...*right now* in Isaiah in Babylonian exile, *back then* in Egypt under Pharaoh, and *later on* under the Roman Empire. Every time it was the bread of affliction, everywhere afflicted by bread that does not nourish!

Surely it is true: everyone knows about the bread of affliction. Everyone knows about impossible quotas to fill, impossible deadliness to meet, impossible tasks to perform, impossible expectations to meet. It might be the expectations of one’s family. It might be the pressure and hassle of work. It might be the vexation caused by one’s children. It might be money worries or unbearable debt and the trap of poverty. It might be the endless vexation of premiums and copayments and deductions. Or it could be worse, no health coverage at all, or no home, or no food, life in a food desert without a grocery store. But of course the bread of affliction is not evenly distributed.

Poor people eat more bread of affliction than do wealthy people.

Women eat more bread of affliction than do men.

Blacks eat more bread of affliction than do whites.

Gays and lesbians eat more bread of affliction than do straights.

Palestinians eat more bread of affliction than do Israelis.

But the bread of affliction is everywhere. It must be chewed and swallowed and accepted when we have no capacity or leverage to do otherwise. That was how it was back in Babylon, and how it is every day among us.

II.

So imagine the displaced Israelites in Babylonian exile, unhappy, sad, humiliated, in despair. And then, right in the middle of the bread of affliction comes this poet Isaiah. He came, as our best poets do, out of nowhere. Maybe he was sent by God as some poets are. Maybe the unbearable circumstance of his people evoked him. Or maybe he had an irrepressible urgency and he had to speak. What we have from him is his abrupt, staggering, disruptive utterance. He called out to his displaced people fed up with the bread of affliction: “Yo, you hungry; yo, you thirsty.”

In his poetry he asked them some questions that he intended to get their attention: “What are you doing? Why do you let the Babylonians feed you such bad stuff? This is what he said:

First question: Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread and does not nourish? Why do you eat the junk food of the empire? Why do you let the dominant economy shape your appetite and propel your life in distorted directions?

Second question: Why do you labor for that which does not satisfy? Why do you use your energy and intelligence toward goals that when you achieve them are empty of meaning and purpose? Why do you let the dominant economy of Babylon send you on wild goose chases for no good reason?

These are not really questions. Isaiah is not waiting for them to answer. These are in fact reprimands. The poet is scolding his people for letting the junk food of the empire propel their life and energy for the purposes of the empire and not for their own good.

III.

And then—take a deep breath!—the poet offers an alternative:

Come buy and eat;
Come buy wine and milk,
without money, without price.

He offers free food that is quite unlike the costly junk food of Babylon. It is God-given food unlike the offer of Babylon or of Pharaoh or of Rome. He uses “bread” as an image of an alternative life, no longer governed by the fake bread of affliction. He invites these vexed, sad exiles to recover their faith and live with the abundance and the freedom given by God. It’s all free!

This is the news to the exiles. God offers alternative bread and alternative milk and alternative wine and alternative life. The poet says, “Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; delight yourselves in rich food.” No more bread of affliction!

This offer of alternative is what the God of the gospel has been doing all along. Way back in Egypt with Pharaoh and his bread of affliction, the alternative was the

sweet taste of manna, the inexplicable bread of the creator God. The story goes like this in the wilderness:

Some gathered more, some less; those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed (Exodus 16:17-18).

This is what the same God of the Gospel will do later on when Jesus comes to a hungry crowd in the wilderness. They were hungry because they had been fed the bad food of Rome. And now Mark reports:

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, an blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people....All ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of fish (Mark 6:41-43).

There was enough free bread left over for all twelve tribes of Israel. In the work of Jesus, God offered these desperate folk an alternative life of abundance. This is how God works:

Against the parsimony of Pharaoh, God sent *abundant manna*;
Against the imperialism of Babylon, God sent *free bread and free milk and free wine*.
Against the predatory power of Rome, God sent the *surplus bread given by Jesus*.

That same bread is on offer outside the zone of the greedy system of fear. But, says the poet Isaiah, to receive that alternative abundant bread, we have to leave the empire. So Isaiah imagines a great procession of God's people marching out of Babylon back to their identity of faith: "You shall go out in joy; You shall be led out in peace" (55:12). And all along the parade route of those who will leave the pressures of empire, like the parade crowd on Front Street, they will be gathered to watch the parade home. The mountains and the hills and the trees, all of creation; they will sing and dance and clap their hands in joy. They will celebrate God's people coming back to their true identity and their sanity. But in order to get the bread of life, we have to leave the demands and the rewards of the empire and its 24/7 rat-race.

IV.

So we have this text in Lent. This poetic text is an invitation to people like us to recognize how much we have gotten comfortable with the bread of affliction, how much we take as normal the mighty pressures of consumerism, the empty promises of convenience, and the insatiable demands of the 24/7 rat-race into which we induct our kids and our grandchildren, all in the name of wellbeing, the assurance of success through the rat-race, and the hint of our superiority through our race or ethnicity or nationality, all of which comes with the junk food of empire. Lent is *a chance to notice*. But also *a chance to depart* from too much fear, too much anxiety, too much anger, too much rush, too much greed. It is not about giving up chocolate for Lent,

even if that is good for our bodies. It is about giving up our taste for the bread of affliction and receiving the better bread of God's abundance.

Well, I suspect that some of you are like me. You do not any longer eat much bread of affliction, because you have arrived at the abundant blessings of God's goodness. So have I. If that is true for you as it is for me, then consider this. Some among us know mostly the bread of affliction and do not know of the abundance, abundance in health care, abundance in housing, abundance in food, abundance in good schools. Those of us who no longer have the taste of the bread of affliction in our mouths are invited in Lent to share that good bread of abundance with those who dwell in affliction by ministries of charity and compassion, by the good work of justice, by the embrace of the neighbor, all of whom have entitlements to good bread. We have entrusted to us the free bread of God's abundance; it will defeat the bread of affliction every time it is shared.

Lent is a time to repent of our taste for the bread of affliction, even if we have gotten used to it. So Isaiah can say in this poem:

Seek the Lord while he may be found...
for my thoughts are not your thoughts.

God has other thoughts and other intentions of wellbeing for us. "My ways are not your ways."

God has other ways for you and me than the bread of affliction.

And now we arrive at this dramatic moment when we taste the alternative bread at this table. This alternative bread offered to the exiles is given again. It is the bread of deliverance. It is the bread of emancipation. It is the bread of joy and freedom. It is the bread that defeats the bread of affliction. It is the same bread that he gave when he took, he blessed, he broke, he gave! With a surplus of life-giving nourishment!

As we eat this bread, remember the bread of affliction that seduces us. Savor and chew and swallow, and imagine us on our way out of the rat-race of empire. Savor and chew and swallow and remember those who know only the bread of affliction. Keep them in mind as they are invited along with us. This is an amazing offer at this table. Like the poet said to the exiles: you who are hungry and thirsty, come without money and without price, delight yourself in God's newness. Savor and chew and swallow along with your neighbors. This is an invitation for all of us who are hungry and thirsty for God's newness!