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First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
3rd Sunday of Lent, February 28, 2016
Text: Isaiah 55:1-9, (Philippians 4:4-9)

Hungry?

Food always gets my attention. That's what pulled me into our text for the morning: the mention of bread (along with milk and wine), the invitation to eat what is good, and the command to delight in rich food.

Have you ever noticed how often food is mentioned in the Bible? Or how many stories are set in the context of eating? Starting in Genesis, on Day Three, even before creating the sun and the moon, God created fruit trees. I am a big fan of fruit and encourage its consumption so much at home that Jack calls me the fruit pusher. But we don't get far in Genesis until we run into Adam and Eve eating what they shouldn't, the forbidden fruit. Then there's Abraham's visit by the three angels when he and Sara learned they at an advanced age would trade in their walkers for a baby carriage which happened over a picnic under the oak trees. Later in Genesis we see how Joseph's astute interpretation of the Pharaoh's dream about fat and skinny cows earned him a job managing Egypt's food supply.

Bread, in particular, is a key theme as the Bible unfolds. When the Israelites, newly rescued from slavery in Egypt at the Exodus, complain that there's nothing to eat in the wilderness, God sends them manna, bread from heaven that miraculously appears every morning. It sustains them their 40 years in the wilderness. I could go on with the mention of feasts and festivals, Ruth gleaning, Elijah being fed by ravens, and more but I'll jump on to the New Testament where food turns up a lot.

You'll recall the Temptation story we heard just a couple of weeks ago. In the wilderness, the devil tempted the famished Jesus to turn the stones into bread. But Jesus replied, quoting Moses, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for daily bread. He told parables about banquets and a welcome-home party featuring marbled steak (aka the fatted calf). Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors, as well as Pharisees. He fed the multitudes with two fish and five loaves of bread. He even called himself the bread of life, and said that whoever comes to him would never be hungry. At the Last Supper Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take, eat. This is my body given for you." At the supper table in the town of Emmaus on Easter night, it was in the breaking of the bread that the disciples recognized their risen Lord.

As they say on those late night tv commercials, but wait, there's more! It was in a dream about eating non-kosher food that Peter realized that God intended the Gentiles to be included in the family of faith. And, in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, there's a great celebration at the marriage supper of the Lamb and another garden where all creation is redeemed and the tree of life grows with twelve kinds of fruit.

The Bible is replete with mention of food—food which carries all sorts of rich meanings, both literal and metaphorical. So, you can't be too surprised when the prophet Isaiah pulls food and drink imagery out of his rhetorical bag when he's preaching. His congregation are Israelites

on the verge of being released from exile in Babylon. He's inviting them to return home and to return to God. Having taken preaching 101, he uses vivid language to make his point: "Come and get free wine and milk," he says, "good and nutritious grub at no cost." That is to say, "Come and get life and vitality, courtesy of a gracious God." He sounds like someone opening a new restaurant handing out coupons for a free meal. He's offering new and abundant life with the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. This stands in stark contrast to their old way of life under Babylonian authority. He's inviting the people to the way of life and freedom, verses the way of bondage and death.

You'd think they'd jump at the offer.

The problem is, over time during the exile, the Israelites have grown comfortable in Babylon. They have assimilated to the culture and lost their distinctive "Jewishness." They have abandoned their practice of Sabbath and distinctive kosher diet, reminders of their covenant with God. They have forgotten the Torah. They are caught up in empire values, which Isaiah equates with junk food.

"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

Why, indeed? We ask ourselves.

Michael Pollan is a food activist. He's written a book called *In Defense of Food*. In it he claims that most of what we're eating today is not really food, and the way we are consuming it—in the car, in front of the t.v., and increasingly alone—is not really eating. Instead of food, we're consuming what Pollan calls "edible food-like substances" — no longer the products of nature but of food science. Just pick up a package of nearly anything in the grocery store and see if you can pronounce the ingredients. For a healthy, nutritious diet, Pollan advocates eating real food—the kind your grandmothers would recognize as food—not too much of it and mostly from plants.

"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

Why? Because the edible food-like substances are easy and quick. They are relatively cheap. They are ubiquitous and unendingly advertised. Everyone consumes them. They taste good and are addictive. Many are even marketed as healthy.

If that's true of junk food, it's also true of the other things we spend our money and our labor on, our time and our energy: material things like clothes and cars, houses and gadgets, technology and all the stuff we stuff in our closets. We are hungry for something--meaning, acceptance, purpose—so we consume. We are hungry for healing, peace, fulfillment, so we consume some more, hoping to feel satisfied.

Consume. That's an interesting word. We are a land of consumers. We consume junk food. And we consume stuff.

We also consume media--endless hours of vapid t.v., shopping online, reading FaceBook posts and watching cat videos. We watch and listen to so much negativity in the media: uncivil discourse, violence, coarseness, cynicism. I'm not saying that all material things and all media are bad. But a steady diet of this stuff does not lead to life and vitality.

The old adage, "You are what you eat," or the newer, Geek version of it, "garbage in, garbage out" just about sums it up.

We are hungry. But we look to the wrong things to satisfy us. "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

“There is a God-shaped hole in each of us.” This quote is attributed to Pascal. His actual words are different but pretty much boil down to this idea. We try in vain to fill the hole with all sorts of things, but they do not—indeed cannot—deliver what we need.

In contrast to the junk food marketed by our consumer culture stands the invitation of God. Old Isaiah with his gray beard and fist full of coupons shouts, “Ho, everyone who is thirsty, come and get free drinks. Everyone who’s hungry, return to our covenant-keeping God, and sit down to the delicious spread God has provided. Pull up to the table and chow down on some nutritious soul food. It’s on the house.”

If you were to dissect our text today you’d find twelve imperatives. Over and over, the prophet, on God’s behalf invites—even implores—us to come, to buy without money, to eat, to listen, to seek, to call, to return. This is a bid for repentance. As Glenn has been preaching recently, Lent is a good time to repent, to turn and go another direction, a life-giving direction.

What might that direction look like for you?

At the La Table event this week, a lovely luncheon fundraiser for Interfaith Hospitality Network, Spencer Frye spoke. He told us his dad was a pastor. So Spencer was at church every time the doors opened. His dad would drag him along (and it was drag) as he delivered a sack of groceries or toys to needy families. When Spencer finished high school he came to UGA but did more playing in bands than studying or church going. He bounced around from one job to the next and, in his words, “lost his way.” Providentially, he was offered the position of construction manager at Habitat for Humanity. At that point he discovered some real meaning and purpose in his life. He *returned*, as it were, to the values that had rubbed off from his dad and from church. He is now director of the local Habitat affiliate, a state representative, and has a great deal of energy around lifting people out of poverty into healthy and sustainable lives. As Spencer spoke, I thought, “This is a fellow that’s been eating soul food, not junk food.”

Don’t fill up on stuff that has no nutritional value. Fill up on the good stuff. Feed your soul with food that will lead to a life worth living. Paul puts it this way,

Summing it all up, friends, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.[Eugene Peterson translation of Phil. 4: 8-9, *The Message*]

Julia Cameron is a writer and director who has spent much of her career helping artists of all kinds get unblocked. She believes that creating art is an act of faith and a very spiritual process. She has many helpful techniques for unblocking our God-given creative energies spelled out in her book called *The Artist’s Way*. One of them is what she calls “the artist date.” She suggests setting aside a block of time every week, perhaps two hours, to nurture your creative consciousness, your inner artist. And everyone has an inner artist, she insists. On the artist date you spend quality time alone feeding your inner artist. It might be visiting a junk store, a hike in the woods, a trip to the art museum, a walk through an ethnic neighborhood, going to an old movie, or a long soak in a bubble bath. You could think of it as a little Sabbath time, a little time spent not in work and busyness but in refreshment. The point is to feed your soul, to nourish your inner artist with images, sensations, and experiences. If you don’t, the creative well dries up.

So what nourishes you? Truly nourishes you? To what life-giving, nourishing practices is God calling you?

I asked one First Pres member recently, “What feeds your soul?” He thought a moment and replied simply, “church.” Yes, church. Church is where we get re-centered and where we worship God, whose grace sustains us every day. Church is a place where we can hear God’s life-giving word read and interpreted, sung and discussed. Church is a community where you can find friends who nurture you along life’s journey and whom you nurture back. Church is the base from which we reach out to serve others. And church is where we eat! We love to eat at church—be it Wednesday night suppers or church picnics, Atrium Fellowship or choir parties. We love to break bread together. We even have some Lenten eating groups who are discussing the themes of food and consumption and hunger. The ultimate meal we consume at church is at the Lord’s Table. In the mystery of Communion, in Jesus’ broken body and blood poured out, we are fed. And by the way, it’s not coincidental that our Food Sundays are usually Communion Sundays. There’s a direct link between being fed spiritually and offering a can of tuna fish for someone else to get fed bodily.

If you are hungry, and I know you are, don’t fill up on junk food. God is inviting you to a banquet, a sumptuous banquet where the bill is already paid. God is inviting you to a life that is full and satisfying. Come! Eat! Enjoy!