

The God who speaks

Isaiah 55: 1–13

A sermon by Peter Budd

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The Universe is big. Really big.

We live on a modest planet circling a modest star off one of the spiral arms in the Milky Way galaxy.

Our sun is one of perhaps 200 billion stars in the Milky Way.

If we could travel at the speed of light, it would take us 100,000 years to cross our galaxy.

And 2¹/₂ million years to reach the next one – Andromeda.

And there are probably more than 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe.

The Universe is really, really big.

And when we contemplate all that is, the question arises:

“Why is there anything at all?”

“And why is it just as it is?”

The simplest answer is that there is something – someone – who made it.

Something – someone – who imagined it and gave it substance.

A God.

An amazing, awesome God.

But people have all sorts of ideas about God, or gods.

So who is the true God?

And could it really be that something – someone – so powerful, so astounding, so awe-inspiring as to be able to dream up the entire Universe...

Would take an interest in, would communicate with, would speak to ... us,
mere specks in the vastness of space.

This evening we begin to think about the question “Who is the true God?”

And this evening we focus on “The God who speaks.”

The idea that God, in some way, speaks, is an idea that runs right through the Bible.

It's there in the opening chapter.

“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” (Genesis 1:3)

God's creative word.

So powerful that what is uttered, happens.

The God who speaks; it's there in the stories of God's dealings with individuals.

Abraham, for example:

“The LORD had said to Abram,

‘Leave your country, your people and your father's household
and go to the land I will show you.’” (Genesis 12:1)

God's guiding word.

The God who speaks; it's there in the promises God makes.

To Abraham:

“I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless.

I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” (Genesis 17:2)

To Moses:

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.” (Exodus 19:5)

To David:

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. ... Now I will make your name great...” (2 Samuel 7:8,9)

God’s faithful word.

The God who speaks; it’s there in the warnings given through prophets like Jeremiah.

“This is what the LORD Almighty says:

‘Cut down the trees and build siege ramps against Jerusalem.

This city must be punished; it is filled with oppression.

As a well pours out its water, so she pours out her wickedness.

Violence and destruction resound in her;

her sickness and wounds are ever before me.

Take warning, O Jerusalem, or I will turn away from you and make your land desolate so that no-one can live in it.” (Jeremiah 6:6-8)

God’s terrifying word.

The God who speaks; it’s there in God’s unfolding plan for humankind.

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfil the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.

‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land.’” (Jeremiah 33:14-15)

God’s loving word.

The God who speaks; it’s there in the person of Jesus Christ.

“The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us.” (John 1:14)

God’s incarnate Word.

The God who speaks; it’s there throughout the Bible.

“All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16)

God’s word written down.

The idea that God, in some way, speaks, is an idea that runs right through the Bible. But how does He speak? And how does He speak to us today?

In the Bible, we read about God speaking in many different ways.

Sometimes with an audible voice.

Like when the young boy Samuel heard God calling him.

But assumed it was Eli the priest who called. (1 Samuel 3:4-5)

Sometimes God speaks through dreams or visions.

Like when the apostle Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia.

Standing and begging him “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9)

Sometimes God speaks through other people.

Like how God spoke to King David through the prophet Nathan.

(2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17)

And God speaks through the written scripture.

Like when the apostle Peter used the Psalms to show that someone should be chosen to replace Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve. (Acts 1:20-22)

And God speaks through the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus told his disciples:

“But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

(John 14:26)

But how does God speak to us today?

People do hear voices, dream dreams, have visions, and prophesy.

But not every voice is truly from God.

Not every dream has a message.

Not every nice idea about God is valid.

So these things need to be tested.

As it says in 1 John 4:1

“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

And the test that John gives, is the Jesus test.

Whatever is said, is it consistent with what we know about Jesus?

What we know about Jesus from those who knew him.

What we know about Jesus, as recorded in the Bible.

Ultimately, we go back to the Bible; to the God-breathed Scripture.

Anyone can make a subjective claim to have heard God.

But the Bible is something objective we can all refer to.

Something solid, against which we can test our subjective experiences.

But human language is never entirely free from ambiguity.

And the Bible isn't always easy to understand.

So how do we read the Bible so as truly to hear God's voice?

Firstly, we need to use our minds.

Test Scripture against Scripture.

To be sure we're not reading into it just what we want to hear.

Secondly, we need to open our hearts.

Open our hearts to the Holy Spirit's guidance.

And be prepared for some surprises.

Thirdly, we need to listen to what Christians throughout the ages have found.

Because there are centuries of experience we can draw on.

And when we apply ourselves honestly, really to understand the Bible.

And approach it prayerfully, open to the inner prompting of the Spirit.

God will speak through it.

Not necessarily answering every question our curious minds may pose.

But raising the questions we need to answer at whatever stage we are in life.

So now let's turn to Isaiah ch. 55, and see what God says there.

It begins with an open invitation.

An unbelievable free offer: “Come”

Four times, in the first verse, it says “Come”:

“Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters; and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

This is an offer of what we really want.

Food and drink that satisfies our deepest longings, our most heartfelt needs.

And it’s free.

We can buy it without money.

We can have it without cost.

And to waste time and effort and resource on anything less is simply daft.

“Why spend money on what is not bread.

And your labour on what does not satisfy?” (v. 2)

If we only just listen and respond, we can have what is good; the richest of fare.

And what is it we’re invited to come and drink and eat?

“hear me, that your soul may live” (v. 3)

This is sustenance for our soul.

It’s real life. Worthwhile life.

And we’re told:

“I will make an everlasting covenant with you”

This is an eternal bond with God.

A relationship with the awesome, creator God.

A relationship that transcends time itself.

This is God’s “faithful love promised to David.” (v. 3)

And in that mention of David, we not only look back to the promise God made to David.

But also forward to the One who will come from David’s line.

To the Messiah. To Jesus.

Because it is through Jesus that all this is made possible.

And this is something for all people.

For nations not even heard of in Isaiah’s time. (v. 5)

God offers us – freely, without cost to us – what will satisfy our deepest longings, our most heartfelt needs.

God calls us to come, to listen.

But if God calls us, he leaves us free to respond.

We need to seek him; call on him while he is near. (v. 6)

And, of course, there’s a problem.

We know – deep down we all know – we’re not worthy of God’s love.

We know there are things we think, things we do, that are wrong; very wrong.

We know we could never be good enough to approach God.

But here’s the truly amazing thing.

If we’re willing to turn our lives around – to repent.

God will have mercy. God will forgive. God will freely pardon. (v. 7)

A free pardon.

Free to us at any rate.

If we turn back a couple of chapters, to Isaiah ch. 53, v. 5,
we get a hint of the true cost of mercy, of pardon.

“But he was pierced for our transgressions,

He was crushed for our iniquities;
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
And by his wounds we are healed.”

And if we look forward to the New Testament, we see it was the terrible suffering and agonising death of Jesus, that makes our pardon possible.

It’s because of Jesus that we can come to God. Freely.

Isaiah ch. 55 links in to the unfolding story, running through the whole Bible, of God’s amazing love for humankind.

It expresses beautifully what Christians call “grace”.

The altogether undeserved, but awesomely deep, love God has for us.

Sometimes people seem to think the Old Testament is all about an angry God.

But Isaiah 55 is just one of the passages that blows that idea clean out of the water.

Because it’s about God’s abundant grace.

The thing is, if we were God, we wouldn’t show mercy.

Human nature is to hold grudges, to want people to pay for what they’ve done.

But God’s ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. (v. 9)

God is merciful.

And God is powerful.

And when God speaks, it has an effect; it always has an effect.

God works on a grand scale.

Which can seem slow in the context of our fleeting lifetimes.

But what God says, happens.

Like rain falling on the earth. (v. 10)

We may not see the effect at first.

But in the ground, hard, dry seeds start to form shoots.

Over time, plants grow. Produce seed.

The barren ground flourishes. We have a harvest.

God’s word will always produce its harvest.

It will achieve its purpose. (v. 11)

What God says, happens.

Because God has spoken, wonderful things will happen.

“You will go out in joy. And be led forth in peace;

The mountains and hills will burst into song before you,

And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.” (v. 12)

A particular encouragement to the Jews when they were in exile in Babylon.

But also an image of the joy in store for all who respond to God’s invitation to “come”.

God. The awesome, mighty, creator God, does speak. Does speak to us.

He invites us to “come”. He offers us mercy. He promises us joy.

And all we have to do is turn – repent – and accept his invitation.

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