

**Isaiah 55:1-5, 7**

You may not have seen it in person, but if you have ever watched a nature show, you've seen it on television. Animals of all kinds coming to the watering hole. Zebras, giraffes, wildebeest, antelope, hyenas, cheetahs, even lions. They come from everywhere. There is no water where they feed on the plains where the tall grass grows, and where the hot sun beats down day after day. And so to the watering hole they come. Often in large numbers. Sometimes in smaller groups. Even a few stragglers come in all by themselves at times. But they all come. They come because they are thirsty.

Animals in this way have more sense than humans. You will not see an animal saying, "I've got too much going on right now to come to the watering hole." Animals do not say, "I'm too tired to come to the watering hole," or "I'm not going. It's always the same old water every time." Animals do not make excuses to stay away from the watering hole. They come because they know they need to drink.

But God is not speaking to animals when He says through His prophet Isaiah, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." He is speaking to you. This is God's watering hole, and so you are where you need to be. It's dry out there. Living day to day in and around Augusta, Missouri is a little like life on the Serengeti. Some animals are always on alert; a bigger animal with sharper teeth could be on the prowl. Food can become scarce for many of them. Mosquitoes and flies can be bothersome.

It's that way for us. It's tough to make a living out there. Jobs are hard to come by. Gas is expensive. And the dollar does not buy much anymore at the grocery store. For some, life is simply too tough. Like on the Serengeti. The weaker ones in the herd get picked off by the big cats. Some die of starvation. Some of thirst. Some get trapped in mud or in thickets. It's that way with people too. We're always hearing of people in the news--celebrities and others--who die of drug overdoses or who give up and take their own life. Some cannot handle the stress of losing their job so they turn to alcohol or to crime. Some make meth and ruin their lives and the lives of others. It's a hot, dry, thirsty world out there, and that's why I say again that you are at the right place--you are at God's watering hole.

On the Serengeti there is no toll booth; no price that animals have to pay before they come to the watering hole. All are welcome to come. Big and small animals. Animals that are healthy and those that are sick and dying. No animal is ever turned away because the cost is simply too great. And so with God's watering hole. "Come," says Isaiah, "buy wine and milk without money and without price...he who has no money, come buy and eat." Friend, you are welcome here whether you come with a large offering envelope or with only a few pennies to give. There is nothing here for you to purchase. God does not welcome only those in the upper classes of society. He does not give His food and drink only if you do something for Him, only if your good deeds outweigh your bad ones.

This does not mean that the food and drink given here is cheap. On the contrary, the cost of God's gifts here is enormous. They cost much more than you and I could ever hope to pay. And yet, for you they are freely given without cost because someone already paid the price for you. Jesus did. He spilled His precious blood for you on the cross. For you He suffered. For you He died. He paid for everything for you. Like an all-inclusive trip to the Caribbean where you leave your money at home because everything is paid for, Jesus paid the enormous cost, and now all the food and drink here at God's watering hole is yours free of charge. And as with animals, big or small, all are welcome.

Whatever your burden, big or small--sins so awful you are ashamed to admit them, guilt pressing down on you, a conscience leaving you sick inside--all your sinful burdens are welcome here. God turns no one away.

But there is one stipulation. You cannot take your burdens back home with you. You must leave your sins here. "Let the wicked forsake his ways," says Isaiah. If you or I are planning on continuing in a life of sin, then do not think for one moment that you will receive anything here. The cost to you is nothing to come here and receive. Jesus paid the price for you. But he who rejects Jesus by refusing to let go of his sins, one day will have to pay the price, for that one will not go to his home forgiven this day.

We cannot come to God's watering hole on our own terms. It's His church, not ours; His gifts, His forgiveness and salvation. Everything here is free for you. Jesus paid for it all. The banquet is spread out for you. The food and drink is exactly what you need. And so come, but come repenting of your sins. Come, not to criticize, but to drink. Come, and leave your selfishness and pride at the cross, because here Jesus forgives you.

Animals come by instinct. God has placed the power and desire to come and drink within them. But not so with us. Not one of us would come to God's watering hole if it was up to us. Not one of us would drink. Not one of us would desire God's gifts. The power and desire to come is not within us; it's in the Word of God. The strength to heed God's gracious invitation and come is within the invitation itself. It's like when Jesus was calling His disciples--Peter, James, and John, Matthew, and all the rest--"Come, follow Me," He invited them. And within those very words was the power which drew them to Christ.

And that same powerful Word has called you here, and here at God's watering hole He gives to you the food and drink you need. The Word in your ears today is doing for you what no food and drink out there can ever do. Jesus, the Word of God, is here forgiving your sins. You are forgiven because He says so. Because He paid the price for your forgiveness, here and now He pardons you fully and completely. Here at His altar the Word made flesh gives Himself for you in this precious food and drink. "Come," He says, "Come...without money and without price." This Sacrament is freely given. Here your Savior enters into you and fills you with all that God has to give. You come hungry and thirsty, but you leave satisfied. And the more you come, the more you will desire to come. The more Christ enters you, the more He is at work within you to draw you closer to Him--to His gifts here freely given.

On the Serengeti the watering hole is a wonderful place. It is where the animals come to drink and be refreshed. But it is also a place where danger lurks. Crocodiles abound to devour those who are not watchful. Lions lie in wait near the watering hole to attack and devour the smaller and weaker animals when they come. This is God's watering hole and it is a place of refuge for you. Christ is here for you with all of God's gifts. But be aware that the devil prowls around like a roaring lion. He attacks when we are not watchful. He lies in wait to turn our thoughts away from God's words in the sermon to our plans for later today; to what we need to get done at home and at work through the week. As we come up to God's altar, like a lion on the prowl, he turns us away from our need and Jesus' body and blood to have us ponder anything and everything else. Because the devil knows that this is where you need to be, he will do anything he can to keep you away from God's food and drink here, and when you do come he distracts you so that you do not drink your fill of these refreshing waters.

But friend, the power to defeat the devil is in the Word of Christ. He defeated Satan for you at the cross, and He defeats him in your life by keeping you in His strong Word here at God's watering hole. And so today drink deeply. Life is tough out there on the Serengeti. You and I cannot fend off the great lion. We cannot survive the hot, dry world out there on our own. But as often as you come to God's watering hole, you come to where you need to be--where Jesus is for you and with you always. Amen.