

Sermon: A Nameless Hunger

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Ottawa, March 23, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

One Hundred and One Dalmatians is a 1961 film, an animation produced by Walt Disney, where the plot follows two Dalmatians, Pongo and Perdita, who gave birth to a litter of fifteen puppies. But the villainous socialite Cruella de Vil conjured up an evil scheme to make their fur into coats, thus Pongo and Perdita set out on a cross-country mission, to save their own offsprings, and in the process rescuing an additional 84 Dalmatians, bringing the total to 101.

There is a scene where the puppies are all watching TV, waiting for a right moment to escape. One of the puppies, Rolly who seems to be always pestering his mother for more food, says, "I'm hungry, Mother. I'm hungry." Perdita replies calmly, "Now Rolly, you've just had your dinner." But Rolly persists, "But I *am*, just the same. I'm so hungry I could eat a...a whole elephant."

There are two types of hunger. There is the type that has a name, the kind of hunger where you know what you want, but you haven't got it and you can't have it.

It is where you are dying for something to eat, but the cupboard is bare, and you haven't got any more money to buy those highly inflated groceries, after you've paid off your highly inflated rent.

It is when you interviewed for a job, and you can't understand why they haven't call you back, after almost two months.

It is the hunger where you long with all your heart to have a baby, but after trying for years with your partner, and it's just not happening.

It is the kind of hunger when you know that something in your life has got to change, but you keep on letting yourself down, and others keep on putting you down.

Such hunger can become all-consuming, debilitating even, impacting your temper, your patience, and your composure. It clouds your clarity of thought, tests your relationships, may even transform your character. As Samuel Wells, an author, theologian and a parish priest, explains in the February 2018 issue of the Christian Century Magazine, that "we are what

we eat, they say. We're also capable of becoming contorted into the shape of what we hunger for."

There is another type of hunger, a hunger that has no name. It lingers deep inside of you, near the bottom of your gut. There is no easy way to feed this nameless hunger, no hot meal, no job title, no accumulation of wealth, nor house full of kids.

The Irish rock band U2, brilliantly captured this second type of hunger, a hunger that has no name, as they sang with such ache, such longing,

"I have climbed the highest mountains,
I have run through fields,
only to be with you, only to be with you.
I have run, I have crawled,
I have scaled these city walls, these city walls.
Only to be with you.
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for.
And I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

I see some of you might've known what I am referring to. More famously, the Rolling Stones, sang with a certain degree of frustration,

"I can't get no satisfaction,
I can't get no satisfaction,
cause I try and I try and I try and I try.
I can't get no satisfaction."

The reason these lyrics stay in our collective memory even after so many decades, is that they pinpoint a space, deep in the gut where this hunger lingers, the hunger that has no name—a nameless, voiceless, yet restless hunger; an aching, gnawing and longing hunger that knows no end, that knows it can't get no satisfaction, that it hasn't found what it's looking for.

Isiah 55 captures precisely these two types of hunger and the difference between them. During the early part of their Babylonian exile, the Israelites were focussing on the first kind of hunger—namely 'home', or the desire to 'go home'. We see that in Psalm 137,

*"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remember Zion.
There on the poplar we hung our harps,*

*for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demand songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?"*

How can we? Their entire existence hinges on this hunger, this emptiness that they were thousands of miles from the Promised Land, and with the hope that once filled or fulfilled, they be satisfied.

Yet, Isaiah 55 makes the transition into the second type of hunger, because Israel did go home from Babylon, they did return to Zion, to their Promised Land. The city of Jerusalem was rebuilt, the wall raised, and the Temple restored. But when all is said and done, Israel was still hungry. "I'm hungry, Mother. I'm hungry." "Now Israel, you've just had your dinner." "But I *am*, just the same. I'm so hungry I could eat a...a whole elephant." It turned out going home wasn't what Israel was hungry for, after all.

In Isaiah 55, with arms wide open, the Holy One of Israel extends this open invitation, "*Hear, everyone who thirst; come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.*"

God appears to be opening a thrift store, a store full of bread, wine, water and milk, where no money is needed, because no price is set. Imagine such a store, where you can come as you are, poor and broken. No question asked, no one is rejected at the door.

Actually I can! In responding to the improvised masses, communities of faith, whether of the Christian, Jewish, Islamic, or even Buddhist tradition, have responded throughout history, in charity and generosity. Here in Ottawa, there are a number of Christian organized drop-in centres, Centre 507 just down the street on Bank, soup kitchens, Shepherds of Good Hope, and food banks, Centretown Community Food Centre, that serve precisely that function.

However, God is not simply offering the satisfaction of that most basic kind of hunger. Through the prophet, the Lord God then posits this this question to us all, in verse 2, "*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your earnings for that which does not satisfy?*" It is a question that attempts to differentiate between the hunger that has a name, and the one that doesn't.

Here is a question, a risky question for you, that I must ask, but don't expect you to provide me an answer, for it is indeed between you and your maker: What are you really hungry for? What would truly satisfy you?

Isaiah 55 doesn't linger there, in asking such questions. The prophet does provide resolutions for us, sort of ways forward. Three of them, in fact.

First, **'seek the Lord while he may be found'**. God is never too far from us, if we are willing to risk the effort. The Lord listens to prayers; God listens to our cries for help. More importantly, the Lord God is merciful, and always ready to pardon, to forgive. With arms open wide, just like the story of the prodigal son, where the father is standing by the door, waiting for the wayward son to return, the Lord God is waiting also for us.

Second, **the words of God feed us, satisfy us**, and nourishes our souls. Whether they be the written words in the Bible, the spoken words from prophets or preachers, the word of God shall not return to God empty. Just as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there, until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall the word of God accomplish that which God has set out to accomplish.

Third, **the Lord God is trustworthy and steadfast**. Just as the Lord has made an everlasting covenant with David, God is making an everlasting covenant with us, through Jesus, the living Word of God. The way of faith may not be easy, it is a narrow path after all. But trust in the Lord will not end in vain—brier and thorn will fade away, cypress and myrtle will take their place, mountains and hills will burst into song, and trees of the field shall clap their hands.

These words of Isaiah, the beautiful language employed, are meant to convey a timeless theological truth: that is the promise of faith is sure, it does satisfy, and in time, we shall see it glorified through Christ.

Are you still hungry? Does your hunger have a name, like a partner, a home, or a new job? Or is your hunger deeper and more insatiable than that, something that even obtaining those things will not satisfy?

"Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." It is free but not cheap, it is priceless but open to everyone, for it is already paid for by the sacrifice of Christ.

Have you found what you are looking for? Have you found God? Do you realize that God is looking for you? Perhaps as one might say, in a most surprising way: God is hungry for you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**