***“Spiritual Drink”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, 3-24-19

**Isaiah 55:1–5, 8–9**

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? . . . 3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.   
5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. . . . 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

**1 Corinthians 10:1–11**

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3and all ate the same spiritual food, 4and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. 5Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

6 Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. . . . 9We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. 10And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.11These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.

When it comes to wisdom, we stand on the shoulders of our predecessors, and when it’s the shoulders of Isaiah of Babylon, they’re those of a giant. I want to start by imagining how this passage would have sounded when it was first read by the Jews living in exile in Babylon.

It is a very original piece of writing. Really it is comparing earthly life with heavenly life, not something the prophets usually did. The earth life is full of labor and effort, and when you get some results, they soon are used up and you have to go back to work again. That’s so obvious that no one had to write about it. But Isaiah here makes a strange contrast between *literal* bread or milk, which are said to be costly and not to satisfy, and a *symbolic* new bread or milk that do not require labor, and that *do* satisfy—that give permanent refreshment. This would have been a surprising idea. Really he is saying something about the *heavenly* life, where spiritual blessings are freely given, and where everything *satisfies*.

An idea such as this: “the greatest gifts are *free*,” might sound like a platitude to us, but would have sounded amazing to them. The notion that people need not work so hard, but could receive bread and milk for free—were unheard of! They would quickly detect that the author was shaping a metaphor or else talking about a higher level of existence. They would know that this was not *material* bread or *literal* milk.

But Isaiah drops that theme, and shifts back to the earthly, talking about “an *everlasting covenant*,” and of the nations coming to seek out the Jews, so that they may learn of God, the infinite God, whose thoughts are so much higher than any mortal’s thoughts.

It is a passage that reveals the high and inconceivable God, while also uplifting the Jewish listeners, giving them hope and faith. It speaks of heavenly permanence, divine generosity, and Jewish mission. It affirms the everlasting covenant where the Jews will be permanently linked to God and will have the assignment of teaching the Gentiles about God. The Jews are to be generous, as God is generous.

Then comes the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, 600 years later. Paul understands himself to be living in the time of the fulfillment of these earlier promises. Gentiles are indeed coming to Jews and asking for instruction regarding the Messiah and the Creator. Paul can certainly talk about heavenly life, but that is not what he is doing here. He is seeing a connection between past and present, and showing how the Biblical text foretold both the life of the Messiah and the life of the church. He finds the present to be prefigured in the biblical text.

Paul looks at the Exodus story and sees baptism, Eucharist, Christ, and spiritual food and drink all present there in the Exodus. He insists that the things in the Exodus story “serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct *us*” (1 Cor 10:11). The punishment of the disloyal Israelites that is found in the story is a warning to us. Don’t put Christ to the test, as the Exodus generation did with their doubting, their desire to turn back to a less challenging life in Egypt, even their desire to have a physical idol of the deity.

Paul sees many things in Exodus as *types* of things now fulfilled in his lifetime. *Type* comes from the Greek word *typos*, a stamp or impression. What it means in literature is that something in an ancient text prefigures or points to something of a later time. Paul sees the Exodus text pointing to *his* time. In Exodus, everyone “passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink” (1 Cor 10:1–4). And Christ was there, too. He says a rock followed the Israelites as they wandered through the desert, and “the rock was Christ” (10:4). Exodus 17 tells of a rock that Moses struck with his staff, causing water to spring forth. Paul is picking up on a tradition that spoke of the rock following the Israelites (from Pseudo-Philo; see James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 279). What a bold connection Paul makes! He implies that God saves and blesses people in the *present* in the same way God saved and blessed people in the *past*. And with the same savior.

The common image between these two texts that causes them to be paired up is the image of spiritual waters or spiritual drink. “Come to the waters,” the Isaiah passage begins (55:1), and the image then changes to wine and milk, and then to bread. The drinks are said to *satisfy*; they have some permanence, and they point toward an everlasting covenant. In Paul the Israelites were baptized in the waters of the Red Sea; they “all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink” (1 Cor 10:3–4). The food probably refers to the manna (Exodus 16:14–19, 35), and the water to what sprang from the rock that Moses struck (Exod 17:6). Paul seems to be saying that the manna and the water were *types*, that is, prefigurations of the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Our translation says they were “examples” for us, but that could be translated “types” just as well (1 Cor 10:6, 11), that is, *images* that foretell something of a later generation.

There was another tradition that the water from the rock helped to implant God’s wisdom in the people (again Dunn, *Theology*, 279). So when Paul uses the phrases “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink,” he is really saying that Christians are nurtured by the Spirit, as the Israelites were nurtured by wisdom. Just as the Israelites shared in the Red Sea waters, in the manna, and in the miraculous water, so do Christians all share the experience of baptism, of being fed by the Scriptures, and nurtured by the Spirit.

There’s a lesson about community here. A group needs to share in the Holy. Although each person’s spiritual journey is unique, sharing that experience will resonate among believers, whenever two or more are gathered. We weave our different threads into one beautiful tapestry. God has always desired to have a community of people to teach and to nurture. Paul claims continuity between the Exodus generation and his present day. Actually there’s a huge difference on the human level, but Paul insists there is a similarity on God’s level. God is still trying to instill wisdom and Spirit into a group of people. They have to pass through waters of separation, they have to partake of the bread and water that is free, and they have to avoid spiritual rebellion. If we abide in this “everlasting covenant,” then we can be “a witness to the peoples” (Isa 55:4). We take in the spiritual drink every time we think of God, not just when we partake in the Eucharist. And we somehow connect with all the people who have ever sought God and stood on these promises.

Christ is with us on every step along our personal journey. When we falter, the Spirit is ready to help encourage us and guide us. The One Source of Truth, Beauty, and Love is eternally available to us.