

# CALL ON GOD'S MERCY

## VERONICA LAWSON provides an ecological explanation of Isaiah 55:6-9.

**Isaiah 55:6** Seek YHWH while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; **7** let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to YHWH, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. **8** For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says YHWH. **9** For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

**E**cological readers of Isaiah 55:6-9, the first reading for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, will immediately notice that it is male-gendered and that it is concerned exclusively with divine-human relationships. The more-than-

human is invoked only to demonstrate the gulf between God's ways and thoughts on the one hand and flawed humanity's ways and thoughts on the other. Earth becomes the negative counterpart to the heavens above.

There is more to this reading, however, than first meets the ecological eye and it would be tragic indeed if we were to miss the force and even the wonder of this prophetic piece.

### Exiles Were the Elite

Like all of our liturgical texts, it needs to be heard within its historical and literary contexts. This is particularly so, in this instance, since these verses are taken from a poem that forms the conclusion to the 15 chapters (Isaiah 40-55) attributed to a sixth-century Babylonian based "disciple" of the great eighth-century BCE prophet, from whom the work as a whole takes its name.

This prophet-poet author is generally referred to as Second-Isaiah. While he addresses the people of Judah in exile, his writings were almost certainly compiled and assembled in their final format in the post-exilic period.

Thanks to Boney M. a Euro-Caribbean vocal group based in Germany in the late 1970s, the story of the Babylonian exile of the people of Judah is fairly common knowledge. From my vantage point at that time, in a senior secondary girls' boarding school, it seemed as though the whole world was resounding with the lyrics of their signature song, *By the Rivers of Babylon*:

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down  
Yeah, we wept, when we remembered Zion."

Those who wept for Zion were the elite Judahites taken into captivity by the Babylonians in the early part of the century as well as their descendants, many of whom had never seen the land of their forebears. The Babylonians had only been interested in deporting those with the capacity to contribute to Babylonian supremacy, probably 10-20 per cent of the population of Judah.

### Poor Left with Foreign Rule

The poor were left behind to eke out a living in the vineyards and fields assigned to them by the Babylonian administrator in Judah (2 Kings 24:14; Jeremiah 39:10).

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## Rise of Persia Brings Hope

The rise of Persia in the mid sixth century, under the leadership of Cyrus the Great, gave hope to the exiles — hope of return to their war-ravaged land, hope that the Jerusalem Temple might be rebuilt and hope that their community might be restored. This is the historical context for engaging in an ecological reading of Isaiah 55:6-9.

## Come to the Water

While our reading focuses primarily on flawed humanity in relation to the divine, its literary context embraces the whole Earth community. The opening line of the poem invites those who thirst to “come to the waters”.

## COVID-19, ITS PROVENANCE AND ITS SPREAD, PROVIDES A STARK REMINDER THAT ISAIAH 55:6-9 HAS MUCH TO SAY TO OUR PLANETARY COMMUNITY.

In the wake of devastating summer bushfires in Australia and California, we are particularly conscious that the thirsty of our planet include all the creatures of Earth.

The closing lines of the poem evoke Michael Leunig's image of the trees as academies of “very ancient music”. They affirm the agency of the mountains and the hills that burst into song and of the trees of the field that clap their hands.

The opening invitation to come to the water and the closing affirmation of the more-than-human provide the literary context for an ecological exploration of Isaiah 55:6-9, a reading that is attentive to both the environmental and the social dimensions of life in our planetary home.

## Seek God

Four times in this passage, we hear Israel's name for God, YHWH, and twice we hear the more general Hebrew name for God, Elohim. The passage is a summons to seek YHWH, to call upon YHWH, to turn away from wrongdoing, to restore right relationship or

right standing with YHWH.

The prophet-poet is addressing those who are not in right relationship with YHWH, those who have established themselves in Babylon and are now so comfortable that they lack the will to return to the land of their ancestors and play their part in rebuilding the Temple and restoring the land. From the prophet's perspective, they have forgotten who they are: what they are doing and thinking is not “of God”.

These recalcitrant exiles are reminded that, guilty as they may be, God will “mercy” them if they “turn” back and bring their thoughts and ways into harmony with the ways and thoughts of God.

The expression “have mercy” is one word in the Hebrew, not two: it is a verbal form (*rahām*) that denotes womb-compassion. Israel's womb-compassionate (*rahûm*) God is a God of forgiveness: God will “womb-compassion” God's wayward exiles and “abundantly pardon” them. Womb-compassion and forgiveness are God's mercy-filled way of being in the Earth community.

The exiles know their sacred songs. They are well aware that it is through God's womb-compassion and enduring love that sinners find boundless forgiveness: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love [*hesed*]; according to your abundant mercy [*rahāmîm*] blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 51:1).

## Invitation to Us

An ecological reading of these verses might inspire us to seek God's womb-compassion and forgiveness for our neglect of Earth and for our tendency to use and over-extract Earth's resources for human convenience and comfort without proper attention to the integrity of the whole Earth community.

It might inspire us to reorder our thoughts and our ways so that the needs of all the creatures of Earth might be met within the means of the planet.

It might inspire us to live in right relationship or right standing with all that is. COVID-19, its provenance and its spread, provides a stark reminder that Isaiah 55:6-9 has much to say to our planetary community. 🌱

## Old Testament Figures in Art

by Chiara de Capoa  
Published by J Paul Getty  
Museum, 2004  
Reviewed by Lyn Smith

BOOK

This wonderful book is a must for teachers and students of Scripture and the history of art. It is a treasury of beautiful images of Old Testament stories from across the ages. Alongside each image is the Scriptural story and an exploration of the detail the artist has painted.

The Old Testament images have a strong link to ideas about Christ that have been important in the Christian understanding of the relationship between God and humanity. The artworks are placed chronologically, which makes it easy for the reader to find and see the development of this relationship.

I enjoyed *Old Testament Figures in Art* both for the simplicity of the layout and the opportunity to explore each artwork. There were many images that I looked at again and again, but my favourite sections dealt with “The Creation of Woman”, the detail of “The Jesse Tree” and “Isaiah and Jeremiah”. The painting that I returned to often was Gustave Moreau's “Delilah” from 1890; its richness of colour was most striking.

This book is a feast for the eyes from beginning to end, a book to be studied or just admired. 🌱

