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Years ago when my son was young, he received a card in the mail, an invitation to something. I don't recall exactly what it was for—maybe a birthday party, neighborhood Christmas celebration, or some other special event. I took the invitation into the house and said, "Hey, Jonathan, you got something in the mailbox!" He came running through the house, eager to see what he had received. Even though I can't remember the exact details of the invitation, I do remember how excited he was to get something in the mailbox. I watched as he ripped open the envelope, took the card out of the envelope, and smiled.

A few weeks later I told my congregation about my son's experience of getting that invitation in the mail. I don't recall exactly what I said, but I used the event as a sermon illustration about the joy of getting mail. A week later, guess what appeared in our mailbox? More cards for my son. Those listening to me heard how much he enjoyed receiving mail, and they decided to respond.

Although the card was sent nearly 30 years ago, the joy of receiving that mail remains as clear as if it happened yesterday. Think of a joyful invitation you

have received in your life. How did you feel? How did you respond?

Invitations come in so many different ways today, more than just cards sent in the mail using postage stamps. Electronic invitations arrive in our email. Phone invitations request our presence at special events. Facebook invitations inform us of all kinds of things happening in the area. Invitations inform us of dinner parties, birthdays, weddings, graduations, retirements, baby showers...You can probably think of other invitations.

Take a moment. Recall a special invitation you received. Tell someone sitting near you about that invitation. If you're watching online, send us a comment about a special invitation you received...

Although the prophet Isaiah had no postage stamps, email, phone, or internet, he sent an invitation to his listeners thousands of years ago, an invitation that echoes in our ears and even nudges us to respond today.

Isaiah invited, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." Have you ever been thirsty? Not just for a

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casual sip, but as though your throat is parched, feeling like it's filled with sawdust.

“Come, and buy wine and milk without money and without price,” the prophet proclaimed. “If you have no money, come, buy and eat.”

What an invitation! Sounds like a free meal with an open bar. What's not to like about that?

The prophet gets a bit too personal, however, when he wonders why we spend money on things we can't eat or drink. His comment may make some of us bristle, feel a bit defensive, wondering why we have to justify our purchases to this ancient prophet. We may defensively reply, “Well, I needed those things to have a better life. I know I can't eat them, but I like all my gadgets. I like stuffing things in my closet since I might need them some day.”

Before we get begin to ignore the prophet's words, Isaiah invites us again, “Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.”

Well, that sounds better. Oh, how we love to indulge ourselves in rich food, though sometimes a bit too much, for then we begin to worry about our weight and our health.

I suggest that rather than hearing these words through our comfortable lives, imagine how they sounded to a group of people who were living in exile, who had been forcibly exiled away from their homes in the midst of warring nations. Some may have been living in poverty, ripped away from their jobs and sources of income. The promise of food and water sounded hopeful!

As political and military leaders acted out their aggression, the ordinary people felt the impact. The prophet Isaiah brought them comfort, a word of hope. “Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you might live.” Although the prophet spoke to those living thousands of years ago, I imagine those fleeing from their homes in Ukraine today might appreciate hearing similar words. They too are on the run, seeking safety. God offered a promise to the exiles thousands of years ago, “I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast love.” That promise remains true today as well, especially for those in chaos, in times of trouble. For those in Ukraine, God is there; God has not forgotten you.

For those in our nation struggling with racial injustice, God's promise remains with you as well. For

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those of color who have not been seen or heard, God has seen you and has heard your cries. God's everlasting covenant remains with you.

For those who have lost their homes in wildfires, God is there with you.

For those in congregations that have seen their attendance decline through the pandemic, God is still here too. God's promise remains with us even when there seems to be less people to hear it.

God never stops inviting us, even when it seems as though our lives are falling apart. Even when we make bad choices, even when we sin, even if we feel as though we no longer care, God still sends us an invitation. An invitation to love. Even when it's hard to do.

That's partially what this season of Lent is about—recognizing that even when our lives fall apart, Jesus continues walking with us, offering us an invitation to follow through the struggles as we journey toward Easter.

Rabbi David Wolpe of Los Angeles' Sinai Temple also knows about the struggles of life, as he

reminded his congregation on their Jewish day of repentance, called Yom Kipper:

One of the great things about repentance is that it doesn't only change the future, it changes the past: because if you become a different person, then all those mistakes and regrets and anguish, instead of sadnesses they become stepping-stones to the new person that you have created inside of yourself.¹

Lent is an invitation to repentance...to change...to hope...to new opportunities. It may not arrive in the mail. You may not see it on Facebook. However it arrives, don't view it as junk mail or spam. As Isaiah suggested on behalf of God, "Pay attention, come close now, listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words." It's an invitation to recognize our own shortcomings, the pains of the world, and to trust that God continues to reach out to us, offering healing and hope. It's an invitation to accept God's love and offer to others. May we offer that gift to one another and the world.

¹ Rabbi David Wolpe, in a "Moments of Connection" video distributed online on September 10, 2021, as quoted on HomileticsOnline, 3-20-22.