

Sermon - Proper 10, Year A
Isaiah 55/Parable of the Sower
7/16/23

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

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty.” The words of the 55th chapter of the Book of Isaiah are a song of consolation. God is speaking to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon: “you feel desperate and abandoned, you are uncertain of your purpose and your future, but my word will not fail you.”

It is generally believed that this portion of the Book of Isaiah was composed somewhere around the early to middle part of the 6th century B.C. Jerusalem had been destroyed, and the remaining people of Israel had been taken to Babylon in captivity. They were torn from their temple, their homes, and their livelihoods, and several generations - by this point - had been born and died in a place far from the one they had known as their inheritance. Everything they had been taught to believe about God and his provision seemed false. The 137th psalm sings of this exile: “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept: when we remembered thee, O Sion. As for our harps, we hanged them up: upon the trees that are therein. For they that led us away captive required of us then a song, and melody in our heaviness: Sing us one of the songs of Sion. How shall we sing the Lord's song: in a strange land?”

But consolation is to come. The book of Isaiah will tell the entire story. By the 55th chapter, the author is insistent: “you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace.” God has not forgotten you. You are about to come home.

More heartening still is the means by which God is bringing his word to blossom here. Remember how the word of God is described: it is like rain and snow falling below onto the

earth. Humans love to believe that we are in control of so much – we can plant a field and till the soil and change the landscape – but how much control do we have over the rain or the snow? Whatever our best efforts, human beings – since time immemorial – are ultimately incapable of summoning or controlling the forces of nature that give life. We need them. We pray for them. But all we can do is simply receive them. Water comes from God alone, and when it does, it cannot help but give life. Water “accomplishes” its purpose not by what it does, but by what it *is*. It falls on the strong and the weak alike. It falls on the evil and the good. It falls on the powerful and the forgotten. It falls on the wedding day and the funeral. We can run in the midst of it or run to hide from it, but it is maddeningly clear that rain and snow belong only to God.

And so the prophet offers this song of grace. No matter how abandoned or desperate Israel may feel, God’s promise is a force of nature. God’s word will accomplish its purpose – not by what it does, but by what it *is*.

Approximately six centuries later, this Word of God has arrived in flesh. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is teaching another impossibly large crowd of people, and he speaks of nature too. This parable that he offers in the 13th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel has become famous as “the Parable of the Sower,” and I imagine it is familiar to many of you. It is one of the first stories I remember learning in Sunday school: “Listen! A sower went out to sow...” And then, of course, the various calamities faced by the little seeds spread out among locations with varying degrees of precarity. A path, the rocks, the thorns. And finally – the good soil.

In my experience, the Sunday school lesson proceeds like this: the message of the Gospel needs good soil to grow, so make sure to become good soil for Jesus. Take out all the rocks. Pull out all the thorns. Scootch your little seeds off the center of the path. Become good soil for Jesus. Unto the ages of ages to the glory of God amen.

But this is very much a misinterpretation of the parable. Can you see the trouble? Think about it - at the most basic level of reality - there is a problem here with how this parable is so often interpreted. Parables are not fables. They are not little morality plays. They simply use earthly images to describe heavenly truths. This parable is not about Jesus telling us to be good soil. Jesus interprets the parable himself – how thoughtful of him! – and when we look closely, we see that he is not prescribing anything. He is describing reality: the Word of God is poured out upon the earth. Sometimes, it is well received. Often, it is not. But it is sowed anyway. Everywhere. And even when the situation appears dire, there is fruitfulness. Even a hundredfold.

This parable is not really about the soil at all. *It is about the sower and his abundant, irrational grace.* It is about the truth that the Word of God is best understood as a force of nature – beyond our comprehension or control but desperately needed and full of life. This parable is not about each one of us and our abilities or failures to make our hearts into good soil. This parable is about a God so generous and so brimming with love that he makes good soil out of parking lots.

The Word of God is being poured out upon the earth, even in the most unlikely places. Sometimes a place or a people or our own hearts will not receive it. We won't understand it. Against all of our best efforts, we'll prefer other things. We'll forget that *we* are not the sower. We are rocks or thorns or completely paved-over highways with apparently little room for anything like growing. But the Word of God *finds us anyway*. It falls on the strong and the weak alike. It falls on the evil and the good. It falls on the powerful and the forgotten. It falls on the wedding day and the funeral. We can run in the midst of it or run to hide from it, but it is maddeningly clear that this Word of Life comes only and purely from the heart of God. It pours upon us freely and without measure, not because of who we are, but because of who God is. It is

a song of consolation, wherever we find ourselves in exile. “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;...you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; and the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song.”

Amen.