

### **Isaiah 55:10-13**

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text this morning is from the book of Isaiah, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

How many of you feel comfortable with talking about your faith with people? Your response is not surprising. That's one of the rules of polite society, don't talk about politics or religion. If you talk about either of those things, you risk offending people and ruining a nice conversation. Of course, what it really means in practice is that you are free to speak about either of those things as long as you hold to a certain way of thinking about such topics. But if you dare to think something different from what is expected, then gird yourself for the storm that is coming your way. Of course, when we do that long enough, apathy begins to creep in so that we no longer care about confessing Christ at all before the world because it's just a lot easier not to. And so instead of actually having to face what Scripture says, we convince ourselves to become universalists and instead say that everyone gets saved no matter what,

because then we don't have to talk about Jesus to anyone anymore because it no longer matters.

Unfortunately, that's not the reason that many of us are so worried about speaking about our faith. We aren't holding our tongues because we think we're going to get persecuted, or because we are a bunch of universalists (I hope). We hold our tongues because we think we are going to lose. If we put ourselves out there to try to "bring someone to faith," then it means that we might fail. If the conversation ends with them confessing faith in Jesus, then we've won. If the conversation ends without that result, then we have lost and no one likes a loser or wants to feel like a loser. So it is more comfortable to sit and do and say nothing.

The problem is that this way of viewing the message of the Gospel is that it is born out of the American Evangelical tradition and it has absolutely nothing to do with how we as

Lutherans should look at this matter. I have never, ever “brought someone to faith” and I never will. And neither have you nor will you, even if you think that you have. St. Paul tells us that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Faith is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word, not through us.

It is not for us to grow faith. Neither is the farmer is not able to make his crops grow. All the farmer can do is plant the seed and tend the field, hoping and praying that something will sprout up. The shepherd doesn't make his sheep drink water, grow their wool, or make them get fat. He simply cares for them as he ought and trusts that his work will pay off. It is not for us to “save” anyone either, for that is the sole purview of the Spirit alone. All we do is simply give a witness to who Christ is. If we take this wrong-headed view of evangelism, it leaves us bearing an incredible burden that is not for us to bear, but it is rather the

sole job of our God to work through his Word. God's Word doesn't return to him empty from others because his Word is powerful.

But that's how the Word comes to other people. What about to you and to me? Does the Word return to God empty after coming to us? This text has often been abused by many American Christians to mean that your life had better change if you're a real, true believer. If you are actually born-again, your life had better reflect that change. After all, the Word of God doesn't return to him empty, so if it isn't doing anything in your life, you'd better be trying harder if you want to be part of this church. If the Word isn't changing you enough or quickly enough, then maybe you're just not actually hearing the Word and are instead stifling the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, the Word of God does not return to him empty. Scripture tells us such. Our Father does not view his speaking to

us as parents often think of speaking to their children, that it's like talking to a brick wall. Rather, his Word is living and active, and it is able to create faith. The Holy Spirit works where and how he pleases. You and I are the recipients of the Word of God doing its work. All who believe do so because God has done the work first. If we believe, the Word has not returned empty. The change that matters most to God isn't what we see on the outside, but the change that is effected in our hearts. If we really want to understand this more fully, we need to look at the next part of that line about the Word not coming back empty. God says, "...but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

So this brings us then to the question, what was God's purpose in sending his Word? John tells us in his Gospel, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace

and truth.” The Father sent his only-begotten Son, the very Word itself into the flesh to live among us.

And while that’s all well and good, it doesn’t the question of why? Why would the Father send his Son into our broken, sinful, and evil world? What was the purpose of the Word of God coming when so few listened? Our Lord said that he came to save the world. His purpose was clear. He came to be the one who would die for us while we were still sinners. And his purpose was accomplished.

The Word didn’t return to the Father empty. But he accomplished this very thing when he hung on a cross for you and for me. The world refused to listen to the Word, and so the Word bled. The Word died. Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered the scourging, the thorns, the nails, and the spear in your place and mine. He died so that we could live. His death then leads to his resurrection and his ascension.

Yes, our Lord Jesus Christ didn't stay in the tomb, but instead rose again! The Word became alive again, and is not silenced even to today. Truly, as with all things in the Old Testament, we find the greatest fulfillment of it in our Lord Jesus. It is only through Christ that the rest of this text can come to pass, "For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

Our joy comes from the salvation that is ours in Christ. We know that our sins have been paid for. We know that the Word has not been empty, because our hearts have been changed so that we would believe. The Word accomplished what the Father sent him to do, to restore the world to himself. We have the

promise that our Lord will return and on that day, all of creation will be restored. The whole of creation shall be cleansed of the stain of sin. All things will be made new in the Word of God through whom all things were made that have been made, Scripture tells us.

That is what the Word of God has wrought in you. It has taken that which was dead and made you alive. The Word of God when brought to bear upon water washes away our sins and makes us new. The Word of God comes and is present here with us, physically, in, with, and under the bread and the wine that we prepare to receive.

Yes, the Word does indeed change our hearts. We hear God tell us to treat our wives with love, to treat them as we would treat our own bodies. We hear God tell us to live in peace with our neighbors and not hold grudges. We hear God tell us to live lives in keeping with the holiness that has been

given to us. And we strive to do these things. But we don't do it because we must do these things in order to be saved. We don't do them in order to prove our salvation either to ourselves or others. We do them because the Word of God brings forth a kind of joy in our hearts that we cannot fully explain.

The very same Word of God that wrought faith in you can and does do that in the hearts of the people who you love. Not because you or I are such skilled debaters, but because we rejoice at having the opportunity to be a witness to what Christ has done for us. And what he has done is bring us life, salvation, and forgiveness. Our prayer is then that he will do the same for those who we would be bold enough to talk to. May the Word who created us and gives us life also give us the boldness to speak of him to those who will listen when the time is right.

Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting.

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