

## June 21 2020 – Father's Day

### Isaiah 55:10-13

<sup>10</sup> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
 and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
 making it bring forth and sprout,  
 giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
<sup>11</sup> 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 succeed in the thing for which I sent it.  
<sup>12</sup> For you shall go out in joy,  
 and be led back in peace;  
 the mountains and the hills before you  
 shall burst into song,  
 and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.  
<sup>13</sup> Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
 instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
 and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,  
 for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

### Message: Rain in the Desert

One of the driest places on the planet is in South America;  
 And that's quite something, when you think about it.  
 That the same continent that has the Amazon rain forest in the east  
 also has the Atacama desert in the west.  
 In a good year, in Atacama, they get about  
 half an inch of rain.  
 Some years, there isn't any rain at all.

The landscape is mostly rock and sand,  
 salt flats and hardened lava flows.  
 It is not unlike the surface of Mars.  
 But life persists;  
 and sometimes, it even flourishes.

Every so often, about once a decade, a little more rain than usual falls.  
 Suddenly, this dry desert landscape  
 bursts forth in an explosion of vibrancy and colour  
 as successive waves of different species of flowers  
 begin to bloom, in white and yellow and purple.

As dry as it usually is, there's the hidden potential for beauty and life,  
lingering under that parched and cracked desert,  
waiting for years for the rains to come.

Waiting is something Christians know a lot about.  
Each year, we celebrate Christmas by intentionally waiting  
during the four weeks of Advent,  
and then we anticipate Easter by waiting  
through the forty days of Lent.

We wait, and we remember how that waiting  
led to hope fulfilled, so many centuries ago.  
And we keep waiting and hoping  
for Christ to finish transforming and healing the world  
as he promised,  
to make it the way it ought to be.

And that's another thing Christians know a lot about:  
the world as it ought to be.  
We use the special term "kingdom of God,"  
but what it's referring to  
is what the world will be like  
when Jesus finishes mending and restoring  
and renewing all creation,  
including you and I.

The world as it ought to be  
– the way it will be, when the kingdom finally fully comes –  
we describe it with a wonderful, inspiring collection of words:  
just, equitable,  
peaceful, compassionate,  
joyful, loving,  
without sickness or grief,  
with God fully present;  
light without darkness, together with one another  
and with God  
without pain or conflict.

With that vision set before us,  
we serve and live as best we can  
to make some of those inspiring words  
as real as we can right now, in Jesus' name.

And for ourselves and for those around us,  
we try to take hold of the abundant life  
that Jesus said he came to give us.

But sometimes, the gulf between the kingdom-vision  
of the world as it ought to be  
and the daily reality of the world as it is...  
that gulf seems to get wider and wider.  
Whatever your area of interest  
– politics, social justice, health, the environment, economics, education –  
some days, it's a challenge to see the good in amongst all the bad.  
It's hard to keep serving God in our own lives  
when the problems seem so big and widespread;  
it's hard to see where we're making a difference;  
it's hard to keep hoping,  
when the future seems so uncertain.  
And we'd like that abundant life that we were promised,  
but sometimes we're not sure how to get it,  
and we begin to feel more like  
a parched and cracked desert  
waiting years for rain  
than a field of vibrant flowers.  
Hope seems like something we used to have;  
uncertainty and frustration make it hard to find hope once more.

How do you speak of hope when everything seems hopeless?  
That's the very situation that confronted the prophet Isaiah  
when God gave him the words we read today to share with Israel.

The people of God had been in exile for nearly seventy years.  
The exile was a profound cultural trauma;  
their great city, Jerusalem, had been destroyed,  
as was the temple where they worshipped God;  
families had been torn apart,  
homes and infrastructure demolished,  
and most of the people had been  
forcibly removed  
from their homeland  
and taken into the  
new and unfamiliar world  
of the Babylonian Empire.

And there they would stay, in captivity, for a generation.

How do you speak of hope for restoration  
to those who had been subjected to deportation and foreign rule?  
The gulf between life in exile in Babylon  
and the remembered life at home in their own country  
must have seemed to get wider and wider  
as every decade passed.

How do you hang onto hope,  
when the world as it ought to be drifts further and further away?  
Yet hope is precisely what Isaiah is charged  
by God to speak to exiled Israel,  
to help them look at their broken world with  
restored and renewed eyes.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered 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 succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

We could take this first part of Isaiah’s prophetic word from God  
as a reminder that God keeps his promises.  
As sure as the life-giving cycles of nature,  
of the fall of rain and snow in season  
and the harvest that follows...  
...God keeps his promises.  
And that’s true – God does keep promises.

But God’s word does more than share information  
or remind us of things we already know.  
The word of God doesn’t just describe the future  
God has planned...  
...the word is how God creates that future.

And that’s what Isaiah is talking about here;  
the effect of God’s word spoken into the world.  
The rain and the snow pour down from the sky,  
and they don’t stop coming  
until the earth is sufficiently watered,  
until the soil is capable of sustaining growth,

enough to provide seed to sow next year  
and bread to eat in the meantime.

The word of God is like that:  
God doesn't stop speaking  
– doesn't stop creating and acting –  
until he accomplishes what he set out to do.  
When God speaks, things happen;  
it's a cause and effect relationship.  
So when God speaks hope,  
that hope is created and made real.

And when God speaks abundant life,  
that's made real, too.  
Our call to worship this morning was actually adapted  
from the first part of Isaiah's word from God to exiled Israel:  
"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;  
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk without money  
and without cost.

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
and you will delight in the richest of fare.  
Give ear and come to me;  
listen, that you may live."

That generous invitation speaks of  
an endless supply of spiritual food and drink,  
the very best food and drink, too  
– no junk food, only the richest and most satisfying fare.  
And all we have to do is come  
and listen to the word of God  
to eat and drink our fill.  
And because God's word doesn't just describe good things,  
it creates them  
– when God speaks and we listen,  
God creates something new within us.  
And the effect that God's word has on us  
is that abundant life;  
like the rain falling until the harvest is ready,  
God's word will keep acting within us  
until we have life abundantly.

Speaking through Isaiah to his people in exile,

God both described and created a future  
where everything is possible,  
where all that is broken and damaged is mended and restored,  
where the exiles go home  
and live in wholeness and peace with God  
and one another.

Hard to say sometimes, and really believe it;  
harder still to keep hoping and living into that promised  
world as it ought to be, in our world as it is.

On another Sunday, at a different time in our lives,  
I think I would probably be encouraging us  
to try and make our own little corner of Babylon  
a little more like home, more like the world as it ought to be,  
more like the kingdom vision that the whole Bible  
– all God's written word –  
speaks to.  
Imagining the world as it ought to be  
– as God is recreating it to be –  
transforms the world as it is right now...  
...because we imagine big and act small,  
knowing that the word of God is life  
and it will achieve its purpose.

But the pandemic and the changes it has wrought in our world  
means that our ability to do much of anything together  
has been put on hold.  
And maybe, for now, that's okay.

Maybe this is our summer to set aside  
much of our work and worry,  
and our acts of service,  
and just fill up on God's word.

For exiled Israel, taking the first steps home,  
breaking with Babylon,  
meant making the word of God their own,  
letting it fill up their emptiness,  
heal them and nurture their spiritual growth.

The secret about Christian waiting  
is that it is always, inevitably bound up  
with Christian hoping.

This summer, as we wait,  
we have time to take God up on his invitation  
to come and be filled,  
to really stop and listen,  
to build up our strength  
as we are fed by the word of God.

We have time  
to let God create that abundant life in us,  
to water the seeds of hope and new life  
lingering and waiting in each one of us.  
Thanks be to God.  
Amen.