

6th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.12.20

Isaiah 55:10-13

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, ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!" ... "Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." (485)

This is the 17th Sunday that we're not meeting in our sanctuary for worship, the 17th Sunday we have mainly the Word to give us shape and shelter for our gathering. The Word, our shared story: this itself is our tent of meeting. Our tabernacle is our proclamation.

I wonder if that's enough for you, for us.

I've been thinking a lot about the Tabernacle, the version of the story from Godly Play. The people are in the wilderness, and they receive a Word from God to erect a tent of meeting, the Tabernacle. It has rudimentary walls, a roof of fabric and tanned leather and shearling.

Of course, as the people spend more and more time outside in the wilderness, their Tabernacle gets more complex, eventually to become, once they're settled in the land, the Temple complex. But it begins simply as a place to gather with the Word—the tablets of the Ten Commandments in their ark and they themselves.

The people and the Word: we gather under the canopy of our faith tradition—and that's it. This is *our* tent of meeting: that God is; that God is the Being in whom we each and all live and move and have our being; that God is active in history and the creation so to guide and counsel, heal and redeem, love and be loved; and that God sent his Son so we might know God better, and trust that God knows us through and through, and understand how deeply we are mired in sin, and stand in awe of God's grace to save, and aim for holiness and righteousness empowered by the presence and persistence of the Holy Spirit. This is the 17th Sunday that this story and confession must be enough for us as our house for worship. We shall be satisfied with this as God's good house for us, the Lord's holy temple under whose canopy we are gathered in.

The Word: is it enough?

I don't know about all of you, but for me this is the longest stretch of time in my life that I haven't gathered on at least one Sunday in some white clapboard meeting house, some rough preaching box somewhere in New England—except for the nine months that I spent in Southern Illinois, which was an alien experience in so many ways. Even in college, in Maine, when I wasn't involved in church life at all, I did come home every few weeks, and would then find myself back in one of the two preaching boxes we had, we of the United Church of Christ in North Hampton, New Hampshire.

Like Church on the Hill, we had two buildings—the main sanctuary on North Hill and the little chapel closer to the beach, it once a Baptist church. Built along the Little River, this's church's baptistry was, I imagine, this little river (a shallow, *cold* baptistry!) before they folded in with the Congregationalists up on the hill. The Congregationalists promised that they'd continue to use this Little River chapel, worshipping there at least eight Sundays a year. Since there's no running water or central heating in the chapel, those eight Sundays were the ones in July and August, doors and windows open so the sea breeze that would blow through.

After that for me was a brief time worshipping at Old South Church, and once a year at Old South Meetinghouse, in Boston while I was a ministerial intern. Then came eighteen years in

Monterey, its meetinghouse a lot like the Little River chapel (though we can boast both heat *and* running water) and then six months at Church at the Hill, its main meetinghouse a lot like the one on North Hill in North Hampton, where I spent the bulk of my childhood.

As for now, I'm affiliated with so many meetinghouses—three! But I can't make any use of any of them. And it's been strange to be so long without a sanctuary, leaving me with a feeling that I finally diagnosed as homesickness. A few weeks into this pandemic, I finally realized what I was (though mildly) suffering: homesickness, that childlike ache when you're exiled from the familiar.

We've been here before. The people of God, of course, have been here before. Isaiah, like most of the Biblical prophets, was speaking of and to the people in exile. Where we land with Isaiah today, he's with the people toward the end of their exile, toward the end of their time in Babylon, just before there's the new possibility of their returning to their own land.

The book of Isaiah, you might remember, is actually three books, speaking from apparently three times over the life of the people. The earliest portions, called proto-Isaiah, speaks from the 8th century before Christ, of a time when the stability of the Davidic reign was long past, when injustice and decadence had overtaken the people, and when neighboring empires had begun to train their troops on Israel and Judah. Proto-Isaiah is a book of judgment: it was coming, the judgment of the just, the judgment of God, who is the force of justice and who therefore often feels like judgment. It was coming, and it would be the end of the United Kingdom of Israel-Judah.

Deutero-Isaiah, speaks to us from a century and a half later, when the judgment had come, the kingdom had toppled, and the people had been forced into exile in Babylon. Now, any pretense at righteousness was gone. Now, even the aspiration to be a good and just people of God was gone. Babylon was a rich and busy place, and it did in many ways turn out to be a place of thriving for the Judeans and Israelites. They could grow or make things there, and market them. They could intermarry there, and have children. But it was an empire. There was little talk of justice. There was still less talk of the Living God who desired justice. It was a place of human thriving and little else—and not thriving for everyone, of course, though if you could hustle you could make it work for you, and if you rose to some power you could make it work doubly much.

Trito-Isaiah, or third Isaiah, speaks from return, once the people were back in their land and faced the promise and challenge and many questions around rebuilding.

The reassurance we heard earlier is from the last verses of Second Isaiah, when the people were yet bound by the word and not much else amidst busy, wealthy Babylon. They were bound together in the promise that, if they endure in faith, they would have cause to rejoice. “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.”

This is one of those verses from the Bible that I find myself thinking about a lot, recalling it as it plays out in my life as true. A word that accomplishes its purpose, a word that has the power to create and bring about its intended aim and end: I love words. I think in words and work in words, and I love the idea that words accomplish their purpose, have the power to create what they name. No doubt this is why I worship a God who creates through the power of the word.

Maybe also this is why I so hate what’s going on lately as regards words. In the “dominant narrative of our day,” amidst especially our current federal administration, there is a newly gross abuse of words. Trump’s lies, his many and terrible and often silly lies: they aren’t just annoying or bizarre. They’re violence. They do violence. Masha Gessen, born in Soviet Russia, from which they fled (Gessen is trans and uses the pronouns “they” and “them”) has written extensively on the effect of lies on the human mind and on human society. They have made it clear that lies, especially open ones that everyone knows are lies though amidst which everyone must live as if true, do in fact divide the mind from itself, divide people from one another, and incapacitate society from acting in reality with agency and power. Lies are an exertion of raw power, and of power over; and people who suffer under them cannot but wither into inaction and incapacity and isolation.

People are saying these days our society is suffering not just one pandemic, but two: COVID and white supremacy. I’d add a third: lies. As isolating as quarantine are publicly asserted lies.

The truth, though, is empowering. The truth does indeed set free, and make powerful so we might act and create, to build and to build together.

To be held, then, and kept by words, that the Word itself might be as sanctuary: I get it. I can get with it. Really, there have even been times during this grim pandemic when Friday has

come and I must sit down and get serious about writing the sermon and I feel it as a relief, a return, a homecoming even. Here's my story! Here's my Father, God; and here's my brother and friend, Jesus. Here is the gathering shelter of home, the words from scripture conjuring what is home.

We can do this, in other words. We can do this! The word holding as we gather across the out-of-doors, the word holding us as we gather across the internet, the word even holding us as we cannot gather because housebound or without internet: we can do this!

Right?

Okay. It's not easy.

It's not easy. It's not a given. That is, I imagine, the point of this parable.

This parable: I wish Jesus hadn't interpreted it, and there's some question as to whether he really did. Biblical scholars are divided on this because the whole point of parables is that they're *not* easily reduced, that they're *not* allegories, simple stories with direct correspondences—this thing in the story equals that thing in life. They're more like puzzles. It's said parables are to tease the mind into active thinking. What's more, it's said Jesus taught in parables because the thing of which he had to teach—namely God and the kingdom of God—isn't a thing so easily reduced to fit into the givens of our living. These, God and the reign of God, are defiant of old form and more playful than can be well managed. God and the Kingdom of Heaven turn themselves inside out **and outside down**. They upset convention and disrupt good order. So, interpreting parables as if they *were* allegories, with direct correspondences (this thing in the story equals that thing in life), settles the mind back down. Ours is not to wonder then, but just to get it, simple cognition, no surprising recognition.

All that said, this parable occurs in all three synoptic gospels, an insistence which is rare, and in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Jesus is remembered to have interpreted the parable. So, there's some pressure here. We apparently really do have here a moral-of-the-story story here, and this is the moral: "Be the good soil."

Or maybe not. Maybe it's not prescriptive, but descriptive. Maybe it's not a matter of "be the good soil" but a matter that some people simply are "the good soil" and some, when it comes to the Word and whether it will suffice for them, are otherwise—distracted by wealth, or run by enthusiasm and caprice, or made stony by daily stress. Really, can we hear Jesus' interpretation and

not understand him to mean that we *should* be the good soil but instead hear him to mean that there are people whose heart and hearing are simply like good soil, into which word-as-seed is tossed and it lands and (by grace or by luck or by chance) it takes hold, while others have a harder time?

So, perhaps there is here some understanding, some empathy, some mercy, and an imperative of ministry—a ministering to those who have a harder time with this. Perhaps Jesus is here admitting that this is difficult, is something we do against some real odds. Relying only on the word, absent the immersive experience of being in a sanctuary surrounded by a people, bathed in sacred music and arranged in good order before an altar of blooming flowers and a looming cross and the really big Bible: this is difficult. It's not a given that this will come easy to us. It's not a given that we'll even want to keep up with trying, keep up with the habit that we might well have practiced for for the bulk of our Sundays—but now for what? It's all gone to us. It's all slipped away.

I've had over the course of the last couple weeks several conversations of why anyone would keep trying. As we look to the future, and as we see more and more evidence that the conditions for spreading COVID are perfectly enacted in church—an enclosed space, a gathered people who settle in for a stretch of time to conspire, which is to breathe together, which is the earliest vision of the church, the Holy Spirit breathed into the disciples so they might breathe together, gathered by and in the Holy Spirit, which is breath, wind, *ruah*—we cannot help but to conclude that gathering together as we so long have is risky and maybe even would be irresponsible, a cutting against what we as people of faith are all about. And with this conclusion we might well wonder, then why bother even to try?

Why, if it's this difficult, would we keep up with this habit?

Why, if staying connected is tenuous at best, wouldn't we just let it go—let go of the hold of the church? Why bother to pledge ourselves, time and talent and treasure, to something whose performance is all but cut off from us? Would you pay for dinner at a restaurant if you aren't going to eat it? Would you buy tickets to a play you won't be able to see? If all the pleasures of our being church are gone to us, why bother with the obligations?

This has been haunting me for a while now, since before the pandemic—that I have lived my whole life in a world full and growing of people who don't go to church, I don't want to live in a world in which there is no church not to go to.

That's what at stake here.

The story of the busy, wealthy empire in which we live has been a good enough story not to need an alternative, for many at least. But this story of unfettered seeking of personal wellbeing has degraded over my lifetime, and it's recently taken a grim turn. Our once aspirational democratic constitutional republic has become a bitter, bickering place. Our striving to become an ever more perfect union has lately felt more like one horror after another, a tacit agreement settling in like a pall that people are all terrible, so we can go ahead and be shamelessly terrible. Masha Gessen says this is the anthropology tacitly confessed amidst fascism: we're terrible, so let's just be terrible. One lawn sign I've had to pass a lot recently reads, "Everybody Sucks: We're Screwed 2020." It's formatted to look like a campaign lawn sign, and I imagine (based on the lovely property) that it's put up in a spirit of clever, educated, left-wing irony. But it's a bleak thing to proclaim, and it's an open door to even worse things.

Our proclamation as the church stands in face of this. Our proclaimed word speaks in resistance to this. The gathering shelter of the Living Word of truth and love is a place of preparation for the building up of something new, something more approaching the good—and it will have none of such clever, self-satisfied nihilism.

If, then, the word is enough for us right now: thanks be to God. If so, also though, bear it is an imperative for ministry. Who is not here? Who might long to be here, but hesitates or stumbles (as over rocks), or gets stuck on distractions or despair (as if by thorns)? Who has faded into what might be isolation because the Word proclaimed across the internet isn't a sustaining thing, is perhaps an enervating or an impossible thing? There's no shame if Zoom isn't as inspiring and holding as the restrained beauty of our physical sanctuary. There's no shame if the Word doesn't seem like enough.

But it might be all we have in coming weeks and months. And it is perhaps now more important than ever to be held and nourished in the Word, now more than ever at least in most of our lifetimes. We have difficult days ahead. We will need grace and resilience, mercy and hope,

more than we have perhaps ever needed. As our Living Word once said to the likes of us, long ago, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This is the safest thing to have breathed unto us right now.

Receive.

Receive.

Breathe and receive.

Then, once you have, go forth to those who haven’t yet received. They might well be home sick, and in need of fresh air.

Thanks be to God.