

Is. 55:1-13 Growing Season

CCRC July 12, 2020

Prayer for Illumination: Creator and Sustainer of all good things, we trust that your Holy Spirit is already now working in and among us as we worship even though we are apart. Now by the power of that same Spirit would you open our ears to hear your Word, our minds to discern it, and our hearts to receive it so that the word you send forth does not return to you empty but accomplishes what you desire and achieves the purpose for which you sent it. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh. Amen.

Back in May, I decided to join the ranks of newbie quarantine gardeners. We're the people who don't really know much about gardening at all, but who have found ourselves with an itch to do something that is both relaxing and infuriating. So I began the tedious [but rewarding] process of pulling almost everything out of my very neglected gardens, tilling the soil, re-cutting the edges of the garden beds, finding the right plants to go in the right places, then planting said plants, spreading mulch, watering the gardens during dry spells, and weeding them infrequently and unenthusiastically. Here we are 2 months in and I'm still going strong with two garden beds, but I've given over two to the weeds and two to the bunnies. The bunnies got to my new black-eyed-susans within a day or two. I planted some [supposedly] bunny-repelling yellow and orange, but the bunnies in Drayton are apparently not very picky eaters. Apparently, *my* neighborhood bunnies love a side of marigold leaves with their black-eyed susans. Anyway. This whole growing season is still something of a mystery to me. Of course, there are well-informed, seasoned, wise gardeners and farmers among us – and I do look forward to the emails I will receive in the coming week with all your tips. But for

now, to reframe the words from our text this morning – dear gardeners and farmers, your thoughts are not my thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. You grow good things, I’m pretty good at growing weeds and bunny food.

In our text this morning the Israelites found themselves in something of a growing season. Not just an agricultural kind of growing season but also a post-apocalyptic, comprehensive rebuilding of their ruined society. God’s hand in this whole growing and rebuilding season remained something of a mystery to them. Let me back up. The prophet Isaiah starts this book with many prophecies that point to God’s coming judgment on the nation of Judah. They had rebelled against God by worshiping idols and neglecting the poor, and so God would bring judgment on them. This judgment would culminate in a time of exile to Babylon – their worst enemy. In Isaiah ch. 5 God paints a picture of the exile – they were going to become like a neglected vineyard. There would be no pruning or cultivation – no one to care for the plants; briars and thorns would grow among them and choke the life out of them; and God would command the clouds not to rain. It is hard to overstate the devastation of the exile in the minds of the Israelites. They were taken from their homeland, their society was completely upended, and the temple (which signified God’s very presence among them) along with the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. They became like that neglected, dried up, mess of a vineyard from Isa. 5.

Now – in this latter part of the book of Isaiah we see the Israelites coming back to their homeland after the exile. The Babylonian empire eventually fell to the Persian empire, and the Israelites were allowed to return home. Now they’re trying to regrow a society. They are regrowing actual fields as well as whole economic systems and towns; they are regrowing international trade relations;

they are rebuilding the temple in hopes that God would dwell with them again and that God would show favor to them again. They're also trying to figure out what on earth God is doing in all of this. The whole exile and rebuilding thing seems terribly inefficient, doesn't it? They have their own ideas of how things should have gone. Surely God must know that you can catch more flies with honey rather than vinegar. Who's to say that exile would result in repentance rather than bitterness and even more rebellion against God? God's thoughts were not their thoughts, neither were God's ways their ways. God's hand in this whole growing season remained something of a mystery to them. The rains still seemed far-off, the briars and thorns still had a strangle hold, and they may have been tempted to believe that the gardener was missing in action during this time that was supposed to be their growing season.

As we ease into our summer rhythms of worship we find ourselves right here in the middle of the growing season – not only in gardening and farming, but in the church calendar as well. The time between Pentecost and Advent is typically called “common time,” (sounds a little boring and *common*) but I have heard it reframed as “growing time” – it's a time for spiritual growth and focused discipleship. This particular summer, though, the idea of growing, or re-growing is taking on a lot of new dimensions. As we slowly begin to emerge from quarantine measures, we can probably relate to those people slowly returning from their exile in a strange land. We are trying to regrow businesses, some version of safe social interactions, some effective and safe education for the fall, and even grow our expression of worship on Sundays in a way that is safe. We can be thankful for the ways our COVID response team is helping us learn how to do that well. But like the returning exiles, God's hand in *this* season of growth remains something

of a mystery. What on earth is God doing in all of this re-opening business anyway? Will anything grow here? now?

We have our own ideas of how things *should* go, or re-grow, and often times we are just plain wrong. I remember back in April being so sure that by July things would probably be back to normal (at least for the summer) and that we'd be vacationing with family members in the States (which is definitely not happening anytime soon). We have our own ideas of how things should re-grow, and sometimes those ideas are not only wrong, but also harmful. A church youth group in Fort Meyers, Florida held a re-opening party just over a month ago. About 100 high school aged kids went to the party. It was billed as a kind of celebration of the return of church services there – complete with games and food and close social interactions like back in the good old days (of February).¹ You can probably guess what happened next. Several families became infected and one person from the youth group even died of the disease. This is just one example of at least 40 outbreaks that have happened in churches across North America.

We have our own ideas of how things should re-grow, especially of how and when we ought to be able to do the things we want to do, but God's hand in all of it remains something of a mystery. I mean really God, if the church can't provide the kind meaningful community and interactions that we all crave...if we can't get together and sing the songs of our faith with loud and clear voices...if an elder cannot hold the hand of a sick congregation member in long-term

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https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/coronavirus-churches-outbreaks.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR2sBCpM3JIGsfBuaZGMi_TAVUnn_Dha9uWltcWyJbePIgEtiIEO_z-jqGU

care...how can anything good grow here? The rain still seems far off, the briers and thorns still seem to have a strangle hold on our economy and churches, and we might be tempted to think that the gardener is missing in action during this time that is supposed to be our growing season. God's hand in all of this remains something of a mystery because God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Neither are God's ways our ways.

But God's ways are good, and God grows good things in his people. God assures the Israelites in our text this morning that "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." In other words, God is telling them "The rain is coming." In Isaiah 5 God withheld the rain from the vineyard, but now the rains are returning. Here in the middle of this passage we see that the rain is God's word. And God's word grows good things. In the beginning of all things, God speaks and stuff happens. The refrain of Genesis 1 is, "God said let there be...and there was." God's word does stuff. God's word goes out like rain on dried up and dying gardens or vineyards – creation begins to bud and flourish. God's word goes out and there is seed for the farmer and bread to eat.

The beginning of our passage this morning is making the same kind of point: God grows good things. Come buy wine and milk without cost. If there is wine, then there must be thriving vineyards, and if there is milk then there must be livestock, and if there is livestock there must be grass and crops. And all this growth? A free gift from God – money cannot buy it. It's not only a free gift, it is

also attractive to the nations. God says that the growth – the splendor of the garden that is God’s covenant people – will be so attractive that nations they do not know will come running to them, wanting to listen to that same word that comes from the mouth of God and wanting to experience that same splendor.

The end of our passage this morning, again, is making the same point – God grows good things. God’s word goes out and the mountains and hills burst into song as the grey dry ground gives way to green shoots and wildflowers. The trees of the fields clap their hands as the branches, heavy with leaves, sway in a rainstorm. God’s word goes out and evergreen plants like juniper and myrtle grow in the place where thorn bushes and briars once were. God’s word goes out and God grows good things – and this is for the LORD’s renown. The resounding consensus of Isaiah 55 is that the Israelites are longer looking at the dried up, overgrown, vineyard of Isaiah 5. This passage is full of images of abundant growth brought about by the word that goes out from God’s mouth.

God speaks the same word to us today. We wonder if anything good can grow here and now. God’s hand in this season remains something of a mystery because God’s thoughts are not our thoughts – neither are God’s ways our ways. But God’s ways are good (even immeasurably better than ours), and God grows good things in his covenant people. So God is speaking to us still today, “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return without watering the earth...so is my word that goes out from my mouth.” People of God, the rain is coming, and in fact is already here. It’s been pretty dry out in Drayton where I live...then on Friday night the rainstorms came through. When I scrolled through Instagram that night I saw all the farmer families posting videos of them playing in

the rain, lying down in the rain, walking through puddles with bare feet...talk about going out with joy. The rain is here.

Throughout Scripture and in the history of the Christian tradition there have been three primary ways that the Church has understood what it means to talk about the Word of God. In all three cases it is the same Word that is spoken – these are not three separate words from God, but one Word.

One way we talk about the Word of God is that Scripture is the Word of God. This book that we read from is not just a historical piece of literature that contains words *about* God, but it *is* God's living and active word (as the book of Hebrews tells us [Heb. 4:12]). Scripture itself is God's life-giving provision that grows good things in God's people. Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: "I cannot think of any text that has such authority over me, interpreting me faster than I can interpret it. It speaks to me not with the stuffy voice of some mummified sage but with fresh, lively tones of someone who knows what happened to me an hour ago."² Scripture is not just an object that we can hold at arm's length and study from a distance, because it is God's Word it also does stuff. Scripture comforts, challenges, invites, warns, instills hope, gives direction...all these things and more. God grows good things in us through the written Word in Scripture.

The second way we talk about the Word of God is that the sermon preached in Christian worship is – in a sense – the Word of God. And just in case you think I am biased, you can check out 1 Peter 1:25, which says, "...the word of the Lord endures forever. And this is the word that was preached to you." The word of the Lord and the word that is preached ought to be the same word.

² Quoted in *A Handbook for Preachers*, Mary Hulst, page 18.

Preaching can be God's life-giving provision that grows good things in God's people. I have a preacher friend who was somewhat shocked to find out that one of his former congregation members ended up leaving her successful career, selling most of her stuff, and becoming a missionary – a decision that she attributed largely to a sermon he gave years ago. "Well shoot," he told me, "I guess those weren't just my words after all." The sermon is not just the preacher's words *about* God or the Bible, like some kind of Sunday morning Bible lecture; rather, in the sermon you ought to actually expect to hear a word from God as God grows good things in us through the spoken Word of the sermon.

Finally, the third (and most central) way we talk about the Word of God comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 1 where John writes, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." This is a reference to Jesus – Jesus is God's Word with skin on. Jesus is God's life-giving provision that grows good things in God's people as he is now present to us by the Holy Spirit. My friend Brian didn't grow up going to church and was only vaguely familiar with who Jesus was and what Jesus was all about. So when he started coming to church with me occasionally he had a hard time following along with my pastor's sermons. But instead of letting his attention wander aimlessly, Brian would pick up the Bible from the pew in front of him and open it up to the stories about Jesus. He told me, "I don't really understand what that guy in front is talking about, but there's just something about this Jesus guy. I want to know more about *him*." I think what was happening is that God was growing good things in Brian's heart as Brian read the gospel stories and encountered Jesus, the Word made flesh.

These are not three separate words, but one Word. And we can be assured that God's word will go out and do what God wants it to do – through screens,

through masks, from a distance, when technology glitches. None of this is a surprise to God or a real threat to God's good purposes.

If the landscape looks dry and withered and you wonder if anything good can grow here and now...If God's hand in this season remains something of a mystery...People of God, hear God say to you this morning, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return without watering the earth...so is my word that goes out from my mouth. [The rain is coming, and in fact is already here.]" The rain that will bring growth is already at work in the spoken Word in the sermons you participate in, the written Word that interprets us as fast as we interpret it, and the Word made flesh – the risen and reigning Christ who is present and working among us by the Holy Spirit. These are not three Words, but one Word, provisions from the same faithful God who grows good things. Thanks be to God.

Prayer of application: God thank you for this, the free gift of your Word. Help us now to receive what we have heard and to live in ways that bear witness to your Word so that all people will coming running to see all the good things that you grow. We pray this in the name of Jesus who lives and reigns together with the Father and Spirit – one God – forever. Amen.