

SLIDE 1 – Isaiah 55 Seek the Lord – abundantly pardon

I will always associate the bible reading from Isaiah chapter 55 with my graduation from high school. I was asked to read this passage in the baccalaureate service, a worship service of reflection as we prepared for the day of graduation. Because I was given the honor of being a lector with this particular word I have always loved returning to this word. It is a reminder that I need thoughts and words greater than my own. It is a reminder that reflecting on God's word is never foolish, but instead, brings new life and hope.

The text in Isaiah 55 lifts up the reliability of the word of God. We proclaim this reliability after every bible reading when we add the liturgy, "Word of God, word of life" – and the people respond, "Thanks be to God." Many things in life are temporary, they have their time, and then it is gone. They fade like seasonal grass or the blossoming of a flower. *The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the God will stand forever.*

Lutheran Christians emphasize the power of the word. We believe the word of God has creative power. Just as God spoke the created world into being, God will speak a word that forms new life for the partner people living in exile in Babylon. The Babylonians had crushed Jerusalem beginning a time of exile. Like modern day wars, the destruction of the region of Judah took several years. Finally the people of Judah were driven out of their homes and led into captivity in Babylon. The prophet encourages the partner people to re-evaluate their past and future. When the word of the Lord came to the partner people many had lived in exile for more than a generation.

Isaiah calls the partner people to forsake wickedness and change direction, although it can be argued that they truly were not willfully disobedient. You would think a people who had been forced from their homes would be eager to return. But there is reluctance among the partner people. Some have become settled over the years, living in Babylon more than a generation. Life in Babylon has become so familiar some of the people have no thought of living in the faith. To "return" to the Lord here means to embrace fully the future that the Lord is now offering. This "return" is not simply a call to spiritual resolve but an embrace

of a new hope and a new historical possibility that will mean a dramatic change of life in political and public groups. The language of Isaiah signals that nothing will be held against the partner people, even if they had for a time assimilated the life in Babylon.

But some scholars note the return of the exiles dragged on for nine decades. The reluctance was real. Isaiah the prophet writes, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord." This is good news for God's people. God offers abundant mercy. God's word is life-giving and creative. God's word is filled with purpose, re-creating the people into agents of God's grace. God renews old covenants giving strength to the reliability of the word. God's word is as life-giving and nourishing as rain. God's word supplied the arc of hope and possibility. The return to the Lord, the return to Jerusalem persisted. The people are transformed! The word of the Lord will accomplish its work! It will produce new life! A new future takes shape!

SLIDE - Metanoia

Just like God's people needed encouragement to reorient their lives dramatically in the Old Testament story of coming out of exile, so Jesus is in conversation with people at a crisis moment in their lives. Jesus had been addressing the disciples and the crowds. Jesus had just told them that they are good at interpreting the weather, when it might rain, or when it might be very hot. Then he asked them, "How come you do not know how to interpret the present time, the time of God's presence among you in the Son?"

Some in the crowd quickly rose to the occasion. How dare Jesus challenge them! They stated a case of unfair suffering, and implied that Jesus should interpret for them what such an event meant. They also told him about a frightening time when some people from the region where Jesus grew up were murdered by Pontius Pilate. What would Jesus make of that? The thinking was that there is a reason for human suffering, and it usually has to do with something from the past in the sufferer's life, something that was morally wrong or evil.

We naturally believe that those who suffer greatly somehow deserve their suffering. We naturally want there to be reasonable explanations for how and why things happen. (We live in a society where many times it is assumed that life is filled with rewards and punishments.) Fortunately, according to Jesus in the

gospel text, and Isaiah the prophet, and elsewhere in the whole of scripture, there is a lot more to it than that.

The biblical witness includes the Old Testament story of Job who suffered severe losses, his family, all his property and livestock, and his health. According to Job's friends he must have done something wrong to deserve his suffering. Job claimed that he was innocent.

The Bible includes the New Testament story of the man born blind. Here the disciples of Jesus ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus answered by telling them the blindness was not the result of sin. No one did anything wrong. Still, we assume, like many before us, that some people are worse sinners – more in debt to God than others, and also more deserving of being condemned. As far as our view of ourselves goes, we conveniently assume that we are not amongst the "worse" ones, but that our sins are only "average."

In the gospel text for today Jesus implies that the victims of these examples did nothing wrong, nothing that caused the sudden end of their lives. These sudden events remind us how precarious life is. Tragedies do not always happen for a reason, and certainly not a divine reason. They simply just happen.

Life is fragile. Jesus in our gospel text redirects perspective. Matt Skinner, a New Testament scholar puts it this way, "If you expect Jesus to give answers to these situations, if you expect security, if you understand life is granted you a certain number of years to do whatever you want – all of this misses the point!"

Life according to Jesus is about bearing fruit. And bearing fruit is linked to repentance. Life is about the chance for repentance, the chance to see things from God's point of view. Skinner reflects on the urgency of Jesus' message, "We have not been trained to view life in this way, not even in the church."

We are living in a time when we need to learn new skills as we turn ourselves more deeply to God's word, and God's point of view, and what God is up to around us. Redirecting perspective changes how you live. Jesus speech to the crowds and his disciples calls them to reflect in this moment as a community. To support his point Jesus tells a parable.

SLIDE - flowers

In the parable of the fig tree, a plant has not been bearing fruit. A tree that has been cared for and yet has not born fruit may continue to live only because it has been granted more time to do what it is supposed to do. The gardener is counseled to fertilize and give it one more year. The mercy of God is like that, giving more time, abounding with patience, and encouraging growth. The reprieve that the tree receives helps to redefine what life with God looks like. It is about mercy and hope. With God nothing is impossible. Repentance, in the Greek, metanoia, is a journey of changing the mind, heart and way of life. It is turning to Jesus, turning to God in order to gain a new perspective. Jesus matters. Can we articulate why?

The time of repentance is not a moment like a minute or a month or even a year. The return of the exiles of Babylon took decades. Unlearning a current view of life that does not bear fruit takes time. Cultivating a new way of life takes time. Relearning what it means to be the people of God in this time and place is the opportunity of the day. We are living in a season and a time when we need to be schooled in skills that open up the presence of God around us. In some ways we have already begun that journey as we already have introduced small ways to reflect on God's word that are more than listening to a sermon.

There are more faithful steps ahead of us. There are new innovations that are waiting to come to light. God has more in store for us. Through it God's powerful word will be the catalyst bringing hope, new life, and abundant grace. The theme of this year's NW Synod Assembly is "The most faithful next step." This implies that a new walk and way is emerging. Here at St. John's in the months to come we will enter into a period of newness as we begin a process called Faithful Innovations. You will hear more about this soon. But this is the time in which we live. This is a time where the word of God is larger and of a new importance.

This is good news for God's people. God's word is life-giving and creative. God's word is filled with purpose, re-creating the people into agents of God's grace. God renews old covenants giving strength to the reliability of the word. God's word is as life-giving and nourishing as rain. God's word supplies the arc of hope and possibility. The return to the Lord is a persistent activity. Tending to continual

return, the people are transformed! The word of the Lord will accomplish its work! It will produce new life! A new future takes shape!