

Seeds and Soil

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Isaiah 55:1-13

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, 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. 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. 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. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 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. 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. 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.”

Sermon

Many churches, pastors, Sunday school teachers, missionaries, all of us as we engage in our respective ministries, and especially teachers and parents have clung to God’s promise made through Isaiah. We’ve also struggled with and doubted this promise. Let’s listen to it once more.

“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 have some garden plots on our church grounds over by the playground. Every year as I drive by the gardens in the winter, it’s difficult to remember the previous spring and the green plants yielding beautiful vegetables. Everything is brown and dried up. It’s also difficult when the gardens are tilled in the spring and tiny seeds or fledgling seedlings are planted, to believe that in a few months the gardens will look like they do today. Today, “the corn is as high as an elephant’s eye, and it looks like it’s climbing clear up to the sky.” (*Oklahoma’s* “O What a Beautiful Morning”)

Holding on to God’s promises when we don’t see anything happening is difficult. Sometimes it feels foolish to hope.

Isaiah was prophesying to people who were exiles . . . refugees . . . who had been forced to live in Babylon after Israel was defeated by the Babylonians around 586 B.C. After about 70 years, Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon and the exiles learned that they were going home. Can you imagine their cautious hope at that moment? Can you imagine some people saying: “I’ll believe it when I see it”? Can you imagine the joy bubbling up in the old people who have accepted that they would never go home and the mixed feelings of the young people born in Babylon who’ve never seen this place their grandparents call home? It’s difficult to believe that a God who allowed the exile in the first place will deliver on a promise to bring them home.

Isaiah's word from God, that God would deliver on his promise, was most certainly received with mixed feelings, especially since "going home" and rebuilding their destroyed homeland would be no picnic.

It's quite difficult to trust that God's word will not return empty and that God will accomplish what God has planned and succeed in the things for which God sent it.

Maybe you're a parent who raised your kids in church, read Bible stories and prayed at home, got them to Christian summer camps, did service projects in the community, and watched *Veggie Tales* until you could bear them no more. But, today, your children are not very interested in faith or church. Asked on a survey about their religious affiliation, they may respond "None."

We say to God: "We planted seeds. You said if we did, our children would have faith." We get disappointed with God and we blame ourselves. We say to God: "What about that promise? It feels like your word is returning empty."

As a church, we sometimes wonder if anything we do makes any kind of difference. We say to God: "Your word does seem to be succeeding in transforming lives sometimes, but not always."

Some of you have fought for justice – true biblical justice – especially for the "least of these our brothers and sisters." We read and watch the news in absolute dismay and grief. It is an uphill battle. Many of us are quite discouraged. We say to God: "What about that promise? It feels like your word is returning empty."

In our New Testament lesson for today, Jesus tells his followers a parable – a story meant to teach a lesson. By this time in Jesus' life and ministry, there are already death threats against him and even his family has questioned his sanity. All this was occurring while he was faithfully planting seeds of the Kingdom of Heaven. He was offering hope and salvation. He was offering a new way of life – a life on earth that resembles life in heaven. He was challenging old notions and reframing what it meant to follow God. Jesus was planting seeds right and left, everywhere he went.

Some seeds fell on the path. Some seeds fell on rocky soil; some seeds fell among thorns. Some fell on good soil.

The various soils represent the human heart. Jesus sowed seeds of the Kingdom of Heaven generously, everywhere, in every human heart.

Sometimes we don't understand, and the evil one snatches the seed up like an opportunistic bird who sees a seed on a pathway.

Sometimes our hearts are like rocky soil. We are gung-ho about Jesus and the Kingdom. But our enthusiasm wanes when the going gets tough. When we get exiled. When having faith doesn't seem to be paying off.

Sometimes our hearts are receptive to Jesus and the Kingdom, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke out Kingdom of God principles and Jesus's way and Jesus' love.

Sometimes our hearts are fertile. We receive the word Jesus is planting in our lives, we have understanding, it takes firm root in us, and we bear fruit.

Jesus saw these varying "soil types" – these various hearts and minds – as he planted the Gospel. It was frustrating and discouraging. It was, in the end, also deadly for him. Even the ones in whom the seed of the Kingdom of Heaven had taken root struggled when faced with Jesus' death and the threat upon their own lives. Perhaps Jesus also said to God: "What about that promise? It seems like your word is returning empty and amounting to nothing."

Yet, Jesus persevered. Even while he hung on the cross, he planted seeds of forgiveness and grace for those who crucified him and the one who hung on the cross beside him.

And Jesus continues to persevere in planting seeds in the hearts of all humans. He plants seeds of forgiveness and mercy. He plants seeds of hope and joy. He plants seeds of salvation and everlasting life. He plants seeds so that his Kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven . . . even now. Jesus never gives up. Jesus never stops sowing seeds.

What's more, Jesus invites us to join with him in sowing Kingdom of God seeds. Yes, Jesus invites us even when we sometimes have hard hearts, shallow hearts, and distracted hearts and minds.

My Grandma Dalton loved to sing the hymn “Bringing in the Sheaves.”

Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness,
Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

Refrain:

Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves;
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

Sowing in the sunshine, sowing in the shadows,
Fearing neither clouds nor winter’s chilling breeze;
By and by the harvest, and the labor ended,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.
Going forth with weeping, sowing for the Master,
Though the loss sustained our spirit often grieves;
When our weeping’s over, He will bid us welcome,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

My Grandma Dalton planted many seeds in many lives. She planted seeds of the Kingdom in her five sons, her Sunday school students, the people off the street whom she housed and fed, her grandchildren, and many more. I’m sure she wondered when looking at our motley crew if God’s promise was true. Was God’s word returning empty? Yet she persevered in the most loving way, planting seeds of kindness, love, forgiveness, and mercy in good times and bad. She trusted God for the harvest. She trusted God to bring in the sheaves.

I want to encourage all of us to take heart today. Jesus is still at work sowing seeds in our hearts, in our children, in our churches, our workplaces, in our community, in our nation, and in our world. Jesus does not give up on any of us.

Do not lose heart in your ministries in all the arenas of your life. Do not lose heart about your children and grandchildren. Try not to lose heart about our city, our country, and our world.

Join Jesus in planting seeds of faith, hope, and love. Join Jesus in planting seeds of the Gospel. Join Jesus in planting seeds of justice. It won’t be easy. We will sow in times of sunshine and shadow, in times of

clouds and winter's chilly breeze. We will sow seeds in times of peace and times of war.

When we become discouraged, let us remember the perseverance of Jesus and never let our hearts get hardened to the truth that God's Kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

We've all seen them. A flower growing out of a cement crack in a wall or sidewalk. Somehow, somehow, a seed grabbed hold of some tiny bit of life and held on and became a beautiful flower.

Cling to God's promise: "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. 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. 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."