

Written Copy: Isaiah 55:8-11 “Powerful Preformative Words”

7th Sunday @ Pentecost: Proper 10

Sunday, July 16th, 2023

Text: Isaiah 55:8-11

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰ “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water 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 shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Exegetical Statement

Isaiah gave the LORD’s prophetic promise 200 years before it happened that His people would be conquered and taken into exile because of their refusal to turn back to Him in repentance. Now in these verses God is promising that the exiles will return and be reestablished in their homeland. Both promises seem like impossibilities, and they would be if they were the promises of a man. But the LORD’s plans, purposes, and ways are far greater and far reaching than any man’s. Our sinful minds cannot conceive of the mysteries of our known world, let alone what is to come. The LORD knows what is needed now as well as what must come about so that His chosen may enter the gates of eternal life. His word is the power and vehicle by which all that needs to happen happens. Just like the snow and rain work the unseen miracle of growth for the seed in the ground, the Word of the LORD descends and accomplishes the change and growth in people’s hearts and lives. While it may not appear so to us, His word always accomplishes what He sends it to do. And because it does, we His children can rejoice. All the He has promised us now and into eternity will surely come about. And His word will make it happen, because it is performative, it does what it states, it accomplishes what it says. By the powerful working of His word the exiles were forgiven and restored. By the powerful working of His word in our lives we are forgiven and restored to His presence now and will be placed in the restored Garden of Eden, which will also be brought forth by the power of His mighty word.

Focus Statement:

The words of the LORD are far greater, His plans farther reaching, and more powerful than ours. What He declares not only informs but becomes reality. The Word made flesh shows this power in that the forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life He accomplished for all men is graciously give through His words of the Gospel. His Spirit uses the words of the Law to prepare hearts and make them good soil, and then plants the seed of faith through the Gospel. His words of Scripture work like rain to nourish the growth of faith and keep it alive. And by His powerful words the New Heaven and earth will be brought into existence, and we will be raised and glorified to live in it forever.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

Our words by themselves lack authority to accomplish what they say. In order for them to have an effect on someone else we need to put weight on them by threatening or coaxing or bribing. Even the words we say to ourselves can’t accomplish the change we desire within us or outside us. Therefore, we might see God’s words of Scripture as lacking the same power as ours.

What the hearer should do as a result:

We should not neglect making use of His word or the means of grace with which it is tied to, but gladly avail ourselves to it, knowing that through it the Holy Spirit is doing a mighty work. We may not always understand it, but we hold fast that God’s plans and purposes are greater than we can ever know.

Subject Sentence: The Word changes reality in our hearts and life

Introduction

We are working on getting our 17-month-old Great Dane named Gideon used to being home alone by himself. Before I leave, I sit down and call him over to me, pet him, and look him in the eye, and tell him “I love you Big Boy! Now I’ll be gone for just a little while, okay? You be a good boy.” And then as I walk out the door I look back, as he looks at me with his ears up and attentive, and I tell him, “I’ll be back soon, I promise. You be a good boy. Don’t rip anything up.” Sometimes it works. But sometimes I come home to something like this, *(picture of dog bed with stuffing ripped out all over the floor)* where in protest he decides to rip the stuffing out of his dog bed. At least he doesn’t attack the sofa anymore *(picture of old sofa cushion with hole ripped in it)*. The thing is, when you talk to him, many times he looks right at you, fixed on you as you talk, like he really understands. And maybe in some way he does. Maybe the problem is not that he doesn’t understand, but that my words don’t carry enough weight with him.

Many times, our words don’t carry the authority that we might like them to. When we have to tell someone else what needs to be done, we have to put extra weight on our words. We add a warning, like with our kids, “If you don’t listen bad things will happen”. We try coaxing or bribing, “If you do it this way, I’ll help you with the rest.” Still, I’m sure you’ve had the experience where you look someone straight in the face, and tell them something, and they will even nod understanding and approval. But then they’ go and do the very opposite thing. It’s frustrating enough when it happens because they knowingly disobeyed, thinking their way is better. But it’s frustrating even when you clearly and carefully explain something, and they act like they are listening, but they weren’t. They go right ahead and do what you asked them not to. You could’ve been talking to the wall. Everything you said went right over their head.

We often look at what is going on around us and see what we think needs to happen to make things better. We wonder why God doesn’t see it that way and act accordingly We see suffering and pain, sickness, poverty, and crime. We know that He has the power to put an end to these things, if not worldwide, at least in the lives of those who are near and dear to us. We wonder if maybe He can’t because He’s not here walking the earth anymore. But when we think that we are wrong.

The Power and Authority of God's Words

Isaiah 55:8-9 ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

He is here among us, present in His Word. And His word has the power to work anywhere and everywhere, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Our words can be weak and effective. But not God's words of Scripture. They have a power and authority that we sometimes take for granted. They are the expression of God's will: His plans and purposes which are beyond our comprehension.

The problem is not the power and authority of God's word. The problem is our thinking and comprehension is so limited by our being bound to this particular place and time that we live in. There is much about the past that we cannot see from our limited perspective. There is only so much that can fit in the history books, and what hasn't been written down from before we were born has been lost to us. We can see what directly surrounds us now, but not what will happen in the future: 5 years from now, 5 days from now, or even 5 minutes from now. We see what would be best for us at this particular moment, without being able to take into account what would be best for those around us, not just now, but going forward into the future.

It's all a matter of perspective. A father once allowed his 10-year-old son a spot in the family garden to plant his own vegetables. Since he loved corn that's what he planted. As June was ending and July fast approaching the father told his son, "You need to get out there and water your garden more." The son responded, "Why? The corn is coming along fine. You said, 'Knee high by 4th of July', and its already almost up to my knee." The father replied, "My knee, not yours."

The LORD sees and knows all things. He sees so much more than we do. He has plans and purposes that you and I could never dream of. Our plans and purposes reflect what we think is best and what should happen now. But what He plans and how He knows it must be put into effect revolve around not just what is good for us now, but what is good looking forward to eternity. He will allow and bring about whatever is necessary so that you will be found standing before our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on the Last Day.

Isaiah 55:10-11 ¹⁰ "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water 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 shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

And how does God go about enacting His will and plan among us and the world? Through His Spirit enacting and fulfilling what He has declared must be in His words of Holy Scripture. God's word has performative power. It not only states what should be or needs to be, it makes it happen. It not only describes reality, it makes reality according to God's plan, will, and desire.

The Powerful Word of God Changing Lives

And what is the plan, will, and desire for us and for all people? That all would be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. And we can see how important that is when the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate preformed and brought about the salvation that no human being could earn or achieve by their own works. He became man so that God could experience suffering and death, so that God Himself could take upon Himself all the sins of the world and die to forgive them all. As a man Jesus could and did take your place and suffer the punishment you deserve. His rising again assures you of your resurrection on the Last Day. And because He is God, He could and did die and rise again so that the whole world might be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Jesus came in fulfillment of the promises of God's word in Scripture.

Jesus earned this for all men. How does it get delivered and applied to each human being? By the power of God's performative word. It happens by the Gospel Message, preached, read, and sung, as well as applied to the waters of baptism. How can this be? The Gospel, like all the words of Scripture is more than just words on a page, or words coming out of my mouth or your mouth. In those words, the Holy Spirit is present. He has the very power that created everything we see at His disposal. He not only declares the Gospel Message of Jesus' death and resurrection as truth, but He makes that your truth and my truth. He makes the forgiveness of sin He earned for all men for you in particular, so that you can know for certain that all your sins are forgiven. He saves you from eternal punishment. He declares you worthy to be a precious child of the Heavenly Father, and as Paul promises, an inheritor of eternal life to come. He makes the Gospel do what it says in your life and mine.

The Soil of the Heart: Why Some Believe But Not Others

Whenever you or I share the Gospel, it's words have the power to change the life of anyone. So why is it that it doesn't sometimes? I'm sure that you, like me, have friends and loved ones whom you've shared the Gospel with and yet they still don't believe. When that happens, what do we do? We blame ourselves; thinking that we didn't speak it clearly enough, forcefully enough, or winsomely enough. Or maybe, we think, the Gospel Message wasn't powerful enough to change our loved one.

In Jesus parable that is our Gospel Lesson we have a partial answer to this problem. It's not the seed, which is the Gospel Message, that's the problem. It's the soil, the condition of the person's heart that the Gospel is being proclaimed to. If the heart is hardened, and all unbelievers' hearts are this way, there is no place for the Gospel seed, no place for Jesus. The person thinks they are fine on their own. They don't need a Savior because they don't really believe they have anything they need to be saved from. The next two kinds of soil, the rocky place and the seed that falls among thorns are heart conditions where the person recognizes the need for a Savior, but perhaps not a King. Following Jesus is OK at first, but when trouble comes because they are a believer, or when the world and its temptations begin to beckon, rather than submit and turn their hearts over to Jesus, they pull them back and take control once again. Jesus is either dethroned completely or relegated to a lower spot. Jesus didn't suffer, die, and rise to take second place. He loves us and wants all of us. And some choose to turn away from Him and keep on going without Him.

But what about the good soil? What about the heart that receives the Gospel with joy and produces the fruit of faith? How is it different? The Holy Spirit through God's word has been at work. He uses the Law to break up the hard ground so that the Gospel Seed can and does take root, planted by His hand. Then He continues to care for that seed, using the Gospel to bring nourishment to that seed of faith just as the rain sent from heaven does to seeds planted in the ground. He uses the Law to clear out the weeds of sinful desires that threaten to choke the seed of faith. He uses God's word to create a repentant heart that recognizes it's sin, and then turns to the Savior for forgiveness and restoration. That repentant heart is the Good Soil. And the life of repentant faith produces the fruit of good works that the Spirit uses to change the lives of others.

It's important to know that each kind of soil, each kind of heart condition is not necessarily describing four different individuals. In my life I had at least three out of the four. When I was an adolescent I had faith, but the weeds of worldly temptation sprung up. I stopped availing myself to the means of grace, God's word, by which the Spirit could kill those weeds. I stopped studying God's word, then stopped going to worship. Despite His work to call me back I refused and allowed the soil of my heart to become hard. I allowed my faith to slip away. But the LORD didn't leave me that way. At the time of His choosing and through a series of things going on in my life, His Spirit proceeded to break that sin hardened heart, first through the Law not preached: through things in my life that I couldn't control and problems I couldn't solve. And then by the Law which made me understand what I had given up. But then, the Spirit brought to bear upon my heart the Gospel. He broke up the hardness of my heart and then planted the Gospel Seed once again. And by the work of God's powerful word, it grew. And it has brought me to where I am today.

Isaiah 55:8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

The LORD is always at work through His word of Scripture as promised. When it doesn't do what we think it should know that it's not a matter of it being without power. It's matter of God's perspective being higher than ours, and Him knowing what must happen and when.

Earl Weaver was at one time the manager of the Baltimore Orioles baseball team. And on his team was a young and upcoming star who would one day be famous by the name of Reggie Jackson. Jackson was fast and already had a number of stolen bases to his credit. Weaver had a rule though, no one was to attempt to steal any base unless he gave the sign to do so. It was the 9th inning, and the Orioles were down a run. Reggie Jackson was on first. He had been watching the pitcher and could tell if he was intending to throw over to first or not. He had a sizeable lead off first. Reggie knew the catcher was not the most accurate thrower. So, he saw his chance, and even though Weaver had not given the sign, he bolted for second base and stole it easily. Still the Orioles ended up losing the game.

After the game was over, Weaver called Reggie into his office and told him he would sit out the next three games. He explained why it was important for Reggie to follow the rule on stealing. In that particular game, once Reggie had stolen 2nd base, first base was open. So the picture walked the batter that was up after Reggie, the hottest bat they had. The next batter up after him had never had a lot of success against this pitcher. Weaver had no one on the bench left to pinch hit. The batter struck out, stranding Reggie at 2nd, and they lost the game. He told Reggie, "All you were thinking about was stealing that base. But I didn't give the steal sign because I was looking at the bigger picture. I was looking to win the game That is true of our God as well. He sees a much bigger picture and acts accordingly.

Conclusion

There is more to our God and His works, plans, and purposes than we can ever understand. But we do know this. God desires that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Those who fall away, or never believe, they only have themselves to blame. We proclaim the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is there planting the seed, but some refuse to let it take root. Yet those of us who believe cannot claim any credit for our faith. It's all the work that the Christ, the very Word of God that came and delivered for all men the salvation God had promised in His life, death, and resurrection. It's all the powerful working of God's word in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

Our words may not mean much nor do what we wish they would. But God's word has power, the power of the Holy Spirit. It can and does work powerfully in our lives and the lives of others. And when we share God's Word, we share words that are filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit. We share life changing words that can work the miracle of faith in any and all hearts. The Spirit continues to work through these words to keep you in faith and keep you fruitful with the good works of faith; not in order to be saved, but because you have been saved, so powerfully and miraculously. The Holy Spirit is always at work according to His own way and timetable. He works in miraculous ways. He has the very power of creation at His disposal. And He is at work to change hearts and minds, as well as keep you and I in faith to life everlasting. Amen.