

July 16, 2023 – Isaiah 55:10-13 & Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

To say that Missouri needs rain is an understatement. Missouri is desperate for rain. Pleading for rain. At the brink of disaster if we don't get rain.

The last estimate I read showed that 99.76% of the state was in some level of drought. Over 50% of the state is in severe drought. According to the National Drought Monitor, Cooper County is merely in “extreme drought,” which is actually not the worst stage. It gets even worse in the counties directly south of us.

And so, it feels a bit ironic for our Old Testament Lesson today to mock us with a passage about God bringing rain to water the earth. Does God bring rain to the earth? I'm not sure I remember anymore. But, of course, he does. And perhaps this passage is even more meaningful to us in a time of drought.

Because ancient Israel wasn't exactly a rainforest. It's a very dry place. The wilderness is absolute desert. And even the fertile areas where farms can be planted are still much dryer on average than Missouri. Planting crops in that kind of environment is always precarious. There's a reason we hear about famine in the Bible so often. A season of drought didn't just mean financial ruin. It meant a lot of people would die.

And so they were keenly aware of what happens when you do and do not get rain. Just like we feel right now, every drop of rain was precious to them. Every drop of rain could mean the difference between a stalk of wheat growing and withering. Every drop of rain was life.

That's really Isaiah's point here. Rain has an effect on the earth. It always has an effect. It brings life. And if you had any doubt of that, you can look outside right now at the way that things are dying to find your proof.

But, Isaiah doesn't say this as a lesson on weather and agricultural. He says it as an analogy. *“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, 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.”*

Rain has a purpose. When there is not a drought, we tend to take it for granted, but it still falls for a reason: to make things grow so that we have food to eat. God's Word is the same way. God gives his Word to us for a reason. To accomplish a purpose. To succeed in the thing for which he sent it. So what is that reason? What is that purpose? What does success look like?

Well, let's look at our Gospel lesson. It's a different parable – a different analogy – but very similar too. We may not have the focus on rain here, but we still have plants growing. In Isaiah, God sends rain. In Matthew, God sends a seed. But in both cases, what's being sent is the Word of God. That's what Jesus tells us, *“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom.”*

And what is the seed's purpose? Well, it's to grow and bear fruit. Which is, really, the same purpose as the rain. Rain falls so that seeds grow and bear fruit. It's all the same thing.

What is the purpose of God's Word? It is to bring life and growth and fruit. And it's not a question of, “Will it happen?” It does happen. Always. Rain can't fall without bringing life and growth and fruit. It just happens. That's what it does.

Which can maybe feel a little confusing. Because I think we all know that there are plenty of people who have heard God's Word and who said, “No. I don't believe that. I refuse to believe that. I want to remain dead in my sins.”

OK, maybe they don't say that. Usually they don't know that they are dead in their sins because... well... dead people don't even know that they're dead. But still, it looks an awful lot like the rain fell on dry ground and nothing grew. Like the Word fell on a dead heart and nothing came to life. Like the Word failed.

Why did that happen? Well, Jesus gives us some reasons in this parable. Sometimes the Word falls on a hard heart and the devil snatches it away before it can take root. Sometimes the Word falls on a shallow heart. A heart that can't withstand the suffering of this sinful world. And so it seems to take root, but then dies off quickly. Sometimes the Word falls on a thorny heart. A heart consumed by luxury and comfort and temptation. Where it does take root, sort of, but then never bears any fruit because it is choked by the weeds.

The seed was good. Each of these seeds had the same potential for life as the seed that fell on good soil. But whether it is the bird, the rocks, or the thorns – whether it's the devil, the world, or our sinful flesh – the seed of God's Word just can't grow like it's supposed to.

That's Jesus' explanation to his disciples. And it is, of course, true. But there's still a missing piece to this puzzle. Because Isaiah seems so adamant: when the rain falls it will do its work. It will accomplish its purpose. It will succeed. Jesus is talking about the reality that the Word sometimes fails, but Isaiah says, "Failure is not an option." How can this be?

Maybe it's because they're not talking about the exact same thing. Yes, they're both talking about the Word of God. But what Jesus is talking about is the Word of the kingdom that his disciples will proclaim to hearers who sometimes don't have ears to hear. Isaiah is talking about the Word in a different way. He's talking about the Word made flesh.

The rain that falls upon the earth is not just the Bible. It's not just my preaching on Sunday morning. It's not just the devotions you read before bed. The rain that falls upon the earth is Jesus.

Jesus is the rain that came down from heaven. Who left his Father's throne so that he could take on flesh and blood and be born of a virgin. Born in a barn and laid in a manger.

And Jesus, at any point over the next 33 years, could have returned to heaven. He could have returned to his Father's throne. He could have said to humanity, "You're not worth the trouble. You are sinners, condemned to hell. You don't listen to me. You don't believe me. You have hearts of stone and ears that do not hear. I'm out. I'm leaving. You can all just wither and die."

He could have. But he didn't. He didn't because he had a purpose. And that purpose was not accomplished yet. To return to his Father at that point would have been to return empty. Empty handed. Without the people that he loved and wanted to save. That would mean failure. And failure was not an option.

And so he stayed. And he watered the earth with his own blood. He brought life to dead souls. He made faith to sprout up and grow and bear fruit. His Father sent him forth to accomplish a purpose and with his last breath he said, "It is finished." And he succeeded in the thing for which His Father had sent him. He succeeded in winning your salvation.

And now Isaiah tells us we look forward to a world changed by what Jesus did. We look forward to world resurrected because of Jesus' resurrection. On that day, we will go out in joy and led forth in peace. Because the war will be over. The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh will be defeated.

The bird will no longer snatch away the Word. The rocks of suffering will no longer cause people to doubt God's goodness. The weeds of temptation will no longer leave God's people weak and fruitless.

No, instead that day will be a day of celebration, where even the mountains and hills sing. Where even the trees clap their hands. Where all creation, groaning since Adam and Eve first sinned, will rejoice that the day of redemption has come. The day when everything is made new.

For God told Adam that because he sinned the ground would be cursed because of him and only thorns and thistles would grow for him. But on that day, instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress. Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle. The curse of the fall will be broken. Eden will be restored.

On that day, God will make a name for himself. He will show to all the world that he is the God who saves. And the earth will become an everlasting sign of his goodness and mercy.

Missouri is dry. Missouri needs rain. Now think about that in spiritual terms. That is the state of your soul without Christ. A dry, lifeless desert, desperate for the water he brings. Jesus is your rain. He gives his life to you. That with his death, you may live. Live and grow and bear fruit by his Spirit for his kingdom. Amen.