

The raindrop that falls to the earth
Isaiah 55:10-13, Pentecost 4, Year A
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Along with biblical studies, ethics, theology, and Greek, Episcopal seminarians are required to complete a summer of hospital chaplaincy. For the vast majority of budding priests—this one included—that experience is the first extended exposure to the trauma of the emergency room, the grief of the ICU, and the anxiety of virtually every hospital ward. It is on-the-job training of the most intense kind, and the lessons learned are sometimes surprising and unexpected.

The most surprising lesson I learned during that crucial summer, a lesson that has been reinforced in my near-decade of ordained ministry, regards the preoccupations of religious people who are faced with their own mortality. My assumption *was* that most people's anxieties and fears when approaching death would focus on what comes next. Does the God to whom we pray exist? Is heaven real? Will loved ones be met there? Is faith strong enough to take us to the other side?

To be sure, some ask these questions and some have these fears. But not many. Overwhelmingly, in my early experience of the hospital and since, the hearts and minds of those faced with their mortality are *recollective* rather than *speculative*. Their concerns are not about the future but about the present and about the past. What they seek from the priest, and by extension from the God for whom the priest is supposed to speak, is some assurance that the life they've lived—the life soon to end—is enduringly valuable, that when they die their life's meaning won't die with them. People yearn to be assured that their lives *mattered*. We are afraid that MacBeth's words are true:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Does life signify nothing? Does it have any enduring meaning? And what if, at the end of our lives, we can't discern what that enduring meaning might be and by whom it will be remembered? *These* are the questions that torture hospitalized souls. In the end it is *these* concerns, and not anxiety about our heavenly rest, that keep us up at night.

These questions are even more urgent for *us*. Twenty-first Century Americans gauge our value overwhelmingly by the things we attain in this life—by our accomplishments—but when our mortality beckons, all the pages of the resume blow away on the wind. The job titles don't comfort; the awards don't console.

And yet, in response to life's feared futility, today the Prophet Isaiah speaks the word of God. Listen again:

*For as rain and snow fall from the heavens
and return not again, but water the earth,
bringing forth life and giving growth,
seed for sowing and bread for eating,
So is my word that goes forth from my mouth;
it will not return to me empty;
But will accomplish that which I have purposed,
and succeed in that for which I sent it.*

From our brief, momentary perspective, the raindrop falls to the ground and disappears into nothingness. But the longer view—God's view—sees the direct line between the raindrop and the shade of the cypress tree that rises up from the water, between the raindrop and the growing crops in the field, between the raindrop and the bread that nourishes the very lives of the ones who watch that same fallen drop absorbed into the soil. God sees that the raindrop's *meaning* is to nourish and participate in life far beyond itself.

Stay with me, because for Isaiah this is not mere bucolic poetry. Isaiah writes to the people of Israel who have lived for seventy years in Babylonian exile, far from home. Before the present generation was even born, their parents were ripped from everything they'd known and moved to an alien land. Like raindrops absorbed into the ground, everything of meaning in life had disappeared, lost forever, a futile waste.

But Isaiah says that the horizon of God's vision is greater than their own. What was of value is not lost—is *never* lost—to God. *In him* it is still germinating, still being made ready until that time when it will come to bloom in a future generation—when cypress and myrtle will replace thorn and briar—and God will lead the people out of Babylon and back into their homeland to discover anew what it means to be the People of God.

This is a drastically different way of conceiving value in our lives than the way we are most accustomed in the 21st Century. Our meaning, God is telling us through Isaiah, is *not* to be found in what we can initiate and complete, in what we can earn and accomplish in a tidy, neat

package in this brief life. Our meaning—*enduring* meaning that forever outlasts us—is to be found in our participation in God’s long view and purpose for his world.

That last statement is so foreign to our DNA that it merits repeating: Our meaning—*enduring* meaning that forever outlasts us—is to be found in our participation in God’s long view and purpose for the world. We are to do our part and trust, even if it seems small and futile, that God will cherish it always and carry it forward to full bloom in God’s good time.

I experienced what this looks like across the centuries of Christian time just last week, when, as many of you know, I was on pilgrimage to Ireland. Among the holy places we visited was Glendalough, “Valley of Two Lakes,” nestled in the midst of the daunting and rugged Wicklow Mountains. Glendalough was founded fifteen hundred years ago by a failed hermit named Kevin, who created a tenuous, mud-and-thatch community of prayer almost certain to die with him. Kevin’s consistent and insistent aim was that the monastery be about experiencing God and not himself.

Six hundred years after Kevin’s died, Glendalough had not. Quite the contrary. It had become the center of learning for Ireland and, indeed, all of Europe, centuries before the foundation of Oxford in England. Kings sent the sons to be educated there. Stone towers and churches had replaced wattle and daub. The abbot of that day was Laurence, a prince who gave up all the accolades of a nobleman’s life to shepherd and nurture the monastery.

Eight hundred years after that, a small band of American Christians joined countless throngs of pilgrims from other countries to walk in the shadow of Kevin’s Cross and experience God at Glendalough. Kevin could not have fathomed the ways in which prayers have been answered and lives changes for the millennium and a half since he first walked over the Wicklow Mountains. And yet, *God* could see from the very beginning. God could *always* see from the perspective of his good view how the brief and faithful lives of Kevin and Laurence and countless nameless saints like them would cause, in Isaiah’s words, the mountains and hills to burst into song, clearing away briars and thorns in the soul to make room for cypress and myrtle. The meaning of their lives is *not* lost, even now all these centuries after their deaths, because they found their meaning not in personal accomplishment or esteem but in God’s purpose for them.

When we grasp this, then what has been of importance to us loses its luster, and what rises in value are completely different things: the encouragement we give to someone that

changes a life, the hand of grace offered to one in need that makes the difference, the effort extended on the projects that are bigger than our narrow vision and the completion of which we may not live to see. To return to MacBeth's image, we are to realize that though our lives in this world are but a scene in a drama, it is *God's* drama, and our part adds to the plot in glorious ways we cannot imagine.

If we will, with God's help, allow our perspective to be formed by God's perspective, if we will let go of the meaning that seems so important now but will be exposed as so empty on our deathbeds, then those beds will eventually prove to be places of rest and comfort rather than briar patches of anxiety. As Isaiah promises, we will, near the end of this walk, recollect the meaning of our lives in joy, and we will know peace. Most importantly, we will move on to the next life knowing that the lives we've lived are *never* lost and *are* enduringly valuable, because they have participated in God's holy purpose.

Amen.