

Weaving Our Way Into God's Story

Text: Isaiah 55:11; Acts 11:17

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...so shall my word be that goes forth 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. Isaiah 55:11

...who was I that I could hinder God? Acts 11:17

The Old Testament text today is Isaiah 55. I don't generally push you to get your Bibles out, but I might today suggest that it would be a good idea. I will give you a little Bible lesson at no extra cost. If you will open your pew Bible to page 650, you will be at Isaiah 55, I trust, if the bulletin is correct. And then if you would page back a few pages to find Isaiah 40.

Biblical scholars believe that Isaiah 40 to 55 is written by a single prophet, not Isaiah of the 8th century, but a prophet who spoke to the people of Israel, the people of Judah, who were in exile in Babylon, having been taken there in 586 B.C. and this word, Isaiah 40 to 55, was addressed to those exiles in Babylon, probably sometime after 550 B.C. To a people who had lost their faith. To a people who had given up on God. To a people who were full of despair. Just ordinary people like us. They figured that their future was behind them and heard that Babylon's gods must be supreme because the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and David had allowed them to be overcome. They were strangers in a foreign land, a captive people. They simply had lost their faith. It is always to a concrete context, always to a particular people, that the Word of God is addressed.

Sometimes we speak about the Bible as being the Word of God, but the Bible isn't the Word of God. The Bible is a record of the Word of God that once has been heard, and that is heard again and again as the Holy Spirit moves upon the sacred page. But this isn't the Word of God. We would love to have this be the Word of God, because then we could get it all between the covers of this book and we could master it. We could master the Word of God. But that is not the Word of God. It is a record of how the Word of God in the past has come to expression, around those originating events of our tradition - Israel and Jesus. And that's all it is.

Yet the Word of God is always God's word addressed to concrete people in their contemporary situation. It is a word of grace, or a word of judgment, but it is always God's word *here* and *now*. This little section of prophecy in Isaiah 40 to 55 is a beautiful example of it. You will recognize how chapter 40 begins, from Handel's Messiah. "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to . . . etc." And then in the 6th verse, "A voice says, 'Cry, and the prophet says, 'What shall I cry?' And what he is really saying is, "What's the use of crying? What's the use of speaking? All flesh is grass. All human flesh is transient, passive, fading. Why should I cry? The grass withers, the flower fades, the breath of the Lord blows upon it. The people are grass. What is there in this call now to cry? Why should I cry?" Well, says verse 8, that's right. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. So, now, get back into the cities of Judah and say, "Behold your God. Lift up your hearts. Raise your voice in the midst of that people and tell them that I'm not through. I'm not finished. There's still something going to happen in the future, and it's going to be a word of salvation."

It ends beautifully in the 40th chapter, verse 28:

"Have you not known, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the earth, he doth not faint or grow weary, and his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youth shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted, but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

So you see, this is the Word of God addressed to this people in their situation and they are called to hope. Fear not. Hope in God. Watch. Something is going to happen. I'm not through yet.

And then the 55th chapter is the concluding part of this writing, which has many beautiful passages in it. If we start at the 6th verse:

"Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous one his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord that he may have mercy on him and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seeds to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

This is the word of the Lord.

And the New Testament lesson from the Book of Acts, the 11th chapter, is Peter's summary of what he had just been doing because he had had a vision and was sent by this vision to the house of Cornelius, the Roman leader, where he had told the story of Jesus and saw the Holy Spirit fall upon them. Now, of course, for Peter, a Jew, to go to the house of a Gentile was forbidden. And, of course, the Church then being good Jewish people, they criticized him and so he had to give account of himself, and the 11th chapter is Peter relating his experience. "Now the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the Word of God, so when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' And Peter began to explain to them,

I was in the city of Joppa praying and in a trance I saw a vision, something descending, like a great sheet let down from heaven by four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles, and birds of the air, and I heard a voice saying to me, "Rise Peter, kill and eat." But I said, "No, Lord, for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth."

But the voice answered a second time from heaven, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." This happened three times and all was drawn up again into heaven. At that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea, and the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brethren also accompanied me and we entered the man's house, and he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, called Peter. He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household." As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning and I remembered the word of the Lord how he said: "John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God? When they heard this they were silent and they glorified God saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life."

This is the word of the Lord.

I suppose it's the campaign, the political campaign, the election coming and all the issues that are constantly before us, and we are bombarded by the media from every angle, but I sense there is a lot of unrest and dis-ease, restlessness and lack of clarity in the minds of many people. Such ambiguity out there. Maybe I'm just getting old. Maybe I don't remember any more former elections, but I don't ever remember a time when so many people were so dissatisfied with their favorite candidate - and when it seems that so many people are going to vote for the least unliked person. However that may be, all of the issues are before us and it seems as though we are in a time of social upheaval and chaos. There is just a lot of unrest in the body politic.

But really that isn't so unusual. All historical times are messy, full of ambiguity. We only dream of the Golden Age and the Good Old Days and the past; they never did exist really. We are simply in the midst of times that are changing. That is always the rule, because history is an ongoing movement, this ongoing tide. We would love to be able to stop the process somehow or other. We would love to be able to have some absolutes in the midst of all the relativities. We would love to have a place to stand in the midst of shifting ground. There is that lust for certitude in our hearts - that longing for something that is more stable and something that is certain. But it's really never that way. It never has been that way.

The thing that has always tried to dislodge God's people from that place to stand is the Word of God. The Word of God is always a word that would unshackle and set free and propel, and energize and move God's people in accord with the purposes of God. And it seems to me that as the people of God, one of the wonderful assurances that we could have is that our life has meaning and purpose, and that our life is being woven into a tapestry that God is weaving. Well, do you believe that? Do you really believe that?

Is there the uncanny that laced into our lives that we cannot explain, but in which we trust? Is there a purpose and a meaning that infiltrates history? Is there an invisible hand? Not Adam Smith's invisible hand that drives the market, but is there an invisible presence powerful and purposeful that impacts the movement of things, that engages our willing and deciding and planning and strategizing? Is there more than meets the eye in the ongoing movement of human history? Is God "a Weaver of a tapestry vivid and warm..."? Is God able because God is a "Spinner of Chaos..." to effect God's purposes - ultimately? That really is the question. Do you live with that kind of fundamental trust - or aren't you so sure? Are things just up for grabs; is it chance? Is all human ingenuity and human willing? Or is there woven in and through it all the eternal God?

Well, the prophet believed in the Word of God to effect history. In Hebrew it is interesting that the term for word and deed is the same word, because the Hebrew conception of God speaking of God's word was God effecting that word. A word was not an empty word. A word was an action word. A word was the Word of God effecting the purpose of God, and so the Hebrews have given us the prophets and that dynamic sense of history moving toward its goal. Not the old cyclic eternal return, but this ongoing movement. That's an Old Testament conception. The prophet as the spokesperson for God was the effector of those purposes. The prophet spoke to the people of God, a word from God. And that word in this case, as we saw in Isaiah 40 to 55, was a word of comfort. It was a word that said to a people in despair, "Fear not." The people of hopelessness wait on the Lord. And that word is full of hopeful expectation. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength and say to the cities of Judah, "Your God is abroad. Lift up your voice. Cry out a word of salvation."

This word the prophet says will be effected – it's going to happen. Oh, you can't get a neat blueprint of it. You can't nail it down and be so certain it is just this way or that way, because "my ways are not your ways and my thoughts are not your thoughts. My thoughts are higher than your thoughts." God never becomes simply accessible to our human conjure. We can never get it all clear.

I smile at those who claim that there is absolute truth. Well sure there is absolute truth - but we don't have it. We only have an approximation, a relative grasp of that which is beyond us. And we are always groping, always feeling our way, because we can only know within the rootedness of our lives in that movement of history. Sometimes, when you hear preachers talk, you would think that somehow or other they were able to get out of the stream of history and look down and see the whole picture. Not so. The Word of God comes to us and that word is released. God's spirit breathing through that word continues to effect God's purposes. That's why the Reformation insight was that there was the word in the flesh of Jesus and the Word of God written, and the word preached. The preaching of the word was presumptuous. And yet right at the heart of our Reformation tradition was the belief that the Word of God preached becomes again the Word of God because it addresses concrete people in a concrete situation with a word – a word of judgment or a word of grace.

So in the Old Testament in the experience of Judah there came this voice, in spite of the fact that the people were despairing, this voice speaking into that transient ambiguous human situation encouraging people to be not afraid - to trust in God. The Word of God is always calling people to trust God, not to know everything that God is doing, but just to trust God. Fundamentally to trust God, to trust that there is that invisible hand - that there is that intangible person - that there is something more than meets the eye that's going on. But the Word of God is always a word addressed to God's people trying to get them moving and setting them free and finding their lives caught up in this grander purpose of God.

So what happens to Peter living in the wake of that time when God's people shut down, rejected the "word made flesh," the one whom God raised up. In the experience of that early church we see that once again that word coming, and nudging and pushing and shoving. Peter says, "Not so, Lord." The word comes and says, "Yes, Peter." And so Peter goes to the house of Cornelius and he says, "You know I shouldn't be here. I am not supposed to associate with you folks. That's what my religious tradition and my religious training has taught me, but now I am being pushed to do what breaks and shatters my neat little system of ideas." And so there he is in Cornelius' house and what does he do? He gives the word. He tells the story - he tells the story of Jesus. And it becomes in the telling the instrument of revelation and insight, and the Spirit of God falls on these people. So Peter goes back and they say, "What in the world are you doing traipsing with Gentiles?" And Peter says, "What in the world was I supposed to do? Here's my story . . ." And he just throws up his hands and says, "How could I hinder God?"

I submit to you, dear friends, that it is not the world that hinders God; it is the Church that hinders God. The Word of God has problems with the people of God because the people of God always want to shut down - always just love to have it right here. It's not right here; it's beyond us. It's in things we haven't yet dreamed of. It is the word that keeps coming to us here, and wherever, because God is always calling us to find our lives being woven into a larger pattern and a grander design in the tapestry God is weaving.

We in our Reformation tradition have found our center back in the 16th century, but if you read the somewhat recent biography by William Bowsma, you find that the 16th century was a period of social chaos and unrest, probably not so different than our own period. It was a period when the Renaissance had permeated the European scene, and the Reformation was afoot and it was leading to the Age of Reason. And all of the old forms and all of the old structures were being challenged and were falling away. All kinds of new configurations were developing and our saint, John Calvin, was a man whom Bowsma says was characterized by anxiety. But some reviewer in the *New York Times* says that, according to the way Bowsma describes it, it wasn't simply anxiety; it was angst, the pain of the world. John Calvin was a man torn.

There were two vivid images that shaped his life: one was the abyss. He was terrified of the abyss - a kind of a free-fall without structure or order. And on the other hand the horror of the labyrinth, being entrapped in all kinds of tunnels and channels and structures. John Calvin was a man who throughout his days was filled with anxiety, with angst, with the pain of existence. He was a great Christian leader, but . . . for us today to imagine that the 16th century was some kind of century of pristine clarity and subtle truth is simply to deny reality. And for us today to think that the answer is for us to somehow or other hark back to that - to reassert it, to reaffirm it, to renew it, to revive it, to cling to old structures and old forms, to buttress them and to shore them up and to buoy them up - is to fail to see that we are God's people today and the Word of God addresses us today for tomorrow!

We've always got a choice. It is either to hark back, to shut down, or to trust God and open up. And it is the call of the Word of God for us to be shapers of the future, not the guardians of the past. In gratitude for what has been, it is our task to address the Word of God to shape what *will* be.

We are at one of those interesting points in history - one of those hinge points in history. The Renaissance is past, and the Reformation is past, and the Enlightenment is past. The Modern Age has come to an end. We are in the Post-modern period and its configuration is not yet at all clear, but we are at a time when there is a shifting and a sifting. The word today is paradigm. Everybody's looking for a new paradigm. And at such times there is a lot of fear abroad and there is a kind of desperate attempt to hunker down and hold on.

The fundamentals of the word that some of us are looking at on Wednesday nights are indications of that social dis-ease with the chaos and the attempt to get hold of something that is tangible and something that can be grasped, and some place to stand. You can't stand. You've got to move. The good news is that you don't have to be afraid, for the Word of God is always out ahead of us, and out of the chaos God is able to create beauty. Remember the image of Brian Wren in the hymns that we have sung here

“Spinner of Chaos,
pulling and twisting,
freeing the fibres
of pattern and form,
Weaver of stories,
famed or unspoken,
tangled or broken,
shaping a tapestry
vivid and warm.”

Have you not heard? Have you not seen? The Everlasting God is not weary, nor is there any lack of his strength. The Creator of the ends of the earth neither slumbers nor sleeps. God is not dead, and God's finest word was not yesterday, but tomorrow – and today . . . today. So it's not all settled. So it's ragged around the edges. Do you trust God - or not? Are you able to flow with it because you trust God? Or have you no faith? Do you want it nailed down - i's dotted, t's crossed? The last word spoken back there? Not so. God's people are always faced with a choice - to trust God today for tomorrow on the basis of God's steadfast love and faithfulness in the past. But it's always before us, dear friends. And the Word of God is always “Don't be afraid.” The best is yet to be - through ups and downs, through valleys and mountains, darkness and light, but God will not abandon us.

My friend, Ernie Campbell, in his recent newsletter talks about the urge to shrink the world. And he says, “As I listen to others who speak for God professionally and I listen to the murmurings of my own heart, I am forced to conclude that many of us live with a kind of chronic sense of being overwhelmed.” Can you identify with that? A chronic sense of being overwhelmed - more questions are being raised than we can answer. Old reasoning doesn't fit. Someone in the night moved all the landmarks. Right? Ministers in their 50s and 60s longing to retire, (Not this one, thank God, but I've got a lot of colleagues that can't wait to get out. That's too bad.) Couples, so happy that their child raising days are over. Too bad. Can't God nurture tomorrow's children? Is God unequal to the future?

Fingers pointing in all different directions to the cause of malaise. Ernie pictures a castle turret and people going up with binoculars and one looks out in this direction and says, “The problem with our world is theological; they're taking our

God away." Another looks in another direction and says, "No, no it's cultural; where have all the values gone?" Another looking this way is saying, "No, it's economic; the world can't support what we've been used to any more." And a fourth one looks off in the other direction and says, "No, it's the ongoing tide of history; what is one to do?" Well, that's what Ernie asks, "What to do?" He suggests that there is that urge in us, probably all of us at one time or another just to shrink our world. Cut it down to size. To go back inside; the cloister calls. What we ought to do is cut back. Stay home. Build a colony of faith in this benighted world. Doesn't that sound pious? And then he says that the churches that have gone back inside are faring better, it would seem, than the congregations that are still intent upon making a difference in the world. The world of claimed absolutes tends to be quiet and reassuring, but the charged atmosphere outside where people claw and scrape for a relatively better rather than an absolutely right will always be subject to division and hostility. Shrink your world. To God, yes. To scripture, yes. To prayer, yes. To family values, yes. To growth in grace, yes. Let the church be the church.

Ernie says, "I have more respect for this position every day. I watch the Orthodox Jews in my neighborhood, marked by their peculiar dress, simply doing their thing. It's tempting." Withdraw. Shrink to size. Shut down. Now I'm just about ready to say, "Ernie, Ernie, don't leave me there. You know you're my last hope." But then in the last paragraph he says, "And yet I cannot." (Didn't lose a hero this time.) He said, "I've come too far for that. I may be short of answers, but I believe that God's purpose for the world does not collapse when I'm confused. All change is not decay. The old is shattered that the new may come to birth. I want to help make it happen. To shrink the world to God and myself in the garden alone, or to God and the company of like-minded people meeting with closed minds behind closed doors tortures my theology to an unbearable degree." We belong outside the camp, with Him who had the whole world in his heart when he lived and when he died. Do we shrink the world to fit our faith? Or do we pray for a faith big enough to match the hour God has given us?

I know not what others may choose, but for me there is only one choice because I trust in God - the Spinner of Chaos - who says, if hope will listen, love will show and tell and all shall be well. All things shall be well!