

Sexagesima  
February 7, 2010  
Isaiah 55:10-13

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*"Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."*

*"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."*

Isaiah 55:10-11

*"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven..."*

There could hardly be a better object lesson, for this text today, than we have in God's creation!

God's Word is likened to the rain and snow which are always active and effective means for producing the results He intends.

This text is, finally, all about God's promises. Do you believe them? On that hangs your happiness, your hope, your eternity.

We sometimes banter about the phrase "God's Word" in such a generic way. Or we think of it primarily in terms of Law—what God's will is for our lives, how we should live.

But how often do we take seriously and stake everything on God's promises to us?

God's Law is only part of His Word to us. His Law is only PENultimate, to lead us to hunger and thirst for the ultimate.

And the ultimate is God's Word of promise. ...Because He alone is all-powerful.  
He alone is perfect love.  
He alone is both willing and able to do what is best for us.  
And He has promised to do it!

*"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."*

That's God's promise, pure and simple.

Do you believe it? Do you believe it both for God's word of LAW as well as his word of GOSPEL? Do you believe God's promise about his word for you, for your loved ones, for His Church, and for all people?

*"It shall accomplish that which I purpose."  
"It shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."*

Well, let's look at the situation "on the ground"—just part of the context in which we consider this promise today.

According to the definitive 2009 Yearbook, published annually by the National Council of Churches...

- "Virtually every mainline church in the U.S. is reporting a membership decline."
- "Among the 25 largest churches in the U.S. only four are growing."
  - Two of them do not confess the Triune God or the divinity of Christ.
  - One of them is known for a predominance of the Law in their proclamation.
  - And the other (on the list for the first time, in the 25<sup>th</sup> position), you've never heard of.
- [The Yearbook goes on to say that...] "The combined membership of the top 25 churches in the U.S. totals just over 146 million, which is down ½ percent from 2008."

Last March, a study released by the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), showed that

- the number of Americans who call themselves Christians has dropped more than 11 percent since 1990.
- In just 18 years, despite an increase of nearly 50 million adults to the U.S. population, almost all religious denominations have lost members.
- Equally, if not more alarming, is the reported increase in the percentage of people who claim to have no religion, now reported to be 15 percent, up from 8 percent in 1990...

And then there's the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, currently the 14<sup>th</sup> largest church in the U.S.

- Next weekend, at our annual adult education presentation, Dr. Rast will likely repeat what he said in a recent lecture, that the LCMS has been in numerical decline since 1968.
- In the August 2006 Lutheran Witness, our church body's main research analyst acknowledged a slow, steady numerical decline, and attributed "the loss of members to a 'continuing trend' that is affecting most mainline Christian denominations."

What is our response to this? How do we understand and react to this reality in light of God's Word to us today from Isaiah 55 where the Lord promises

*"My Word 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."*

One response may simply come from ignorance of God's Word. This response doesn't realize that God has promised, in His Word, that His Word will always be efficacious and will succeed in that for which He sends it. And so the response is to panic, to worry, and to place the proposed solutions and hope entirely in man.

Another response is born of unbelief. That is to say that God's promise about His Word is just pie-in-the-sky passivism. "Of course it's up to us to get the job done. If God's Church on earth is going to survive, and succeed, and grow numerically, it depends on us and how hard we work."

Conversely, if and when there is decline, the fault must either lie with God's promise or with our effectiveness in getting the Word out."

But today's Gospel has something to say about that, doesn't it? The different result produced when the seed fell on four different types of ground wasn't the fault of the seed (i.e. God's Word). And it wasn't the fault of the sower. Rather, it simply reflected the reality of sin, and hard hearts, and Satan's tireless efforts to keep God's Word from taking root in hearts where it can do its work.

These last decades aren't the first time God's people have witnessed a numerical decline in a certain corner of the kingdom. Consider Noah, for example, and the eight people who survived the flood.<sup>1</sup> Consider Abraham and his interceding with God to save the city of Sodom for the sake of (first) 50, then 45, then 40, 30, 20, and finally 10 righteous people.<sup>2</sup> Consider Elijah, who said of the Old Testament Church in his day:

*"The people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."*<sup>3</sup>

And why do we immediately think of bottom line numbers anyway, to measure the "success" of God's Word? Isn't each individual soul, that is brought to saving faith in Christ, precious in God's sight? Was God's promise, in Isaiah 55, proven false when the majority of Israelites in Jesus' own day didn't come to saving faith in Him? Was God's promise proven false when many turned away and followed Jesus no longer after his Bread of Life sermon by the Sea of Galilee?<sup>4</sup>

May it never be! And may we never think it, or act in such a way as to betray a man-centered faith, rather than one centered in God's promises in Christ!

*"My Word 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."*

This is true of God's Word of Law, which will always and unswervingly work to hammer the stony hearts of people, and expose our sin, and drive us away from flimsy self-trust, to our Savior Jesus Christ.

And it is true of God's Word of promise—His Gospel—which, no matter what our mood or feelings might be on any given day, will always and unswervingly be working to raise us up from the dust of repentance, and unite us to Christ and His righteousness.

Who would ever want to avoid such a tremendous gift of God for even one week?!?... the rain and snow of His proclaimed Word which confronts us in the midst of our idol-making, and breaks down our towers of Babel, and then raises us up—weekly, daily, richly—as new and holy believers in Christ?!?

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 3:20

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 18

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 19:10

<sup>4</sup> John 6

Whether we are talking about the growth of the Church, or our own sinful failure to trust God's promises for life, and health, and protection, and forgiveness, and eternal life—no matter what—it's all about God's promises!

He sent His Son, Jesus Christ to live and trust the Father's Word perfectly in our place... and ultimately to die for all our sins, including our chronic MIStrust in God's Word.

Jesus died for it! Jesus died for you! God's Word declares this to you again today. And His Word is more powerful than your unbelief. His Absolution—His daily Word of forgiveness to you that comes in preaching, water, bread and wine, in the communion of saints—His promise that you are forgiven, in Christ, will not return empty, but will accomplish His saving purpose for you, and succeed in reconciling you to Him for eternity! Believe it! It's His promise to you!

Let Satan rage! Let him have his temporary victories! He is nothing. His tyranny over you is nothing.

Christ and His promises are everything. They are sure. They are certain. They are powerful and active. And they are for you.

They are a beautiful snow, a gentle rain, that just keeps on coming, to wash you clean... to give you peace and hope for the future.