

Pentecost 6, 7.12.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 55:8-13; Psalm 65:9-13; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“God’s Word Changes Us”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Words, words, and more words: each day, all of us are bombarded with words. We are confronted with many and competing words in newspapers, magazines, television, and the internet. We restlessly change channels and websites searching for objective news – looking for good news. Many of the words we hear are given political and ideological spin, and if you are at all like me, there are times when I feel worse after watching the news. Words, words, and more words: who has the words of eternal life?

Today’s readings are intended to remind us that in the midst of the many and competing words in our world, only God’s word creates life and gives peace. Only God’s word has the power to renew our minds and change our lives. In today’s reading from Isaiah, God says, “*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.*” Isaiah confronts us with the reality that our thoughts, ways, and words are often at odds with God’s thoughts, ways, and words.

In spite of words, words, and more words, our thoughts and ways often do not accomplish much. Our attention span to words and any kind of meaningful discourse is often fragmented and brief. As human beings we talk a great game, but we often have little to show for all our words. The news cycle moves on and with it, so too, do our good intentions. Today, the voices of Isaiah, Paul and Jesus encourage us to listen again for God’s word that renews and changes us – words of eternal life.

In verse 11 of today’s Isaiah text God says something truly remarkable. It is something no one would ever say: God says, “*My word goes out 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.*” Imagine a pundit, analyst, or public leader who could speak words, explain their purpose, and see to it that their words were successfully accomplished in the lives of human beings. God’s word is different than the words of people and the world, because God’s word is universal for all humanity of every nation and every language. Only God’s word satisfies the human heart, making us more just, merciful and loving than we thought we could ever be capable of.

There is something important to learn here: God’s word is missionary. This means God is always

in mission. It is God's very nature to speak a word that goes out into the world with purpose, accomplishing God's mission in all creation. For example, in Genesis, God says, "Let there be light" (1:3) and there was light; and again, "Let us make humankind in our image" (1:26), in this way human life is sacred. God's word creates with purpose. In John's gospel, Jesus - the Word incarnate - says, "I am the light of the world" (8:12); "I am the good shepherd." (10:11); "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:26); "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:16). God's Word is the way, the path, and the royal road to eternal life. God's Word is the way.

Speaking words is not simply an activity that God engages in; rather, *God's word is God's mission*. God has no other mission but to communicate life, peace and love. God's word always seeks to grow in our hearts and to renew our minds.

So when God says, "*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,*" God is also telling us something about ourselves. We have no shortage of words in our media driven world. We are drowning in words, and yet, where are the words of eternal life? Where are words that will make us truly alive? Where are words that will renew and heal our divided world?

From a small boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus spoke to a crowd, telling them the Parable of the Sower. Jesus said, "*some seeds fell on the path, and the evil one snatched them away; other seeds fell on rocky ground, and soon withered away; other seeds fell among thorns, and were choked.*" More than ever, this parable about God's word has meaning for a world in search of meaning, for a world seeking words of forgiveness, renewal, and unity.

In this parable, Jesus names three obstacles to God's word taking root and bearing fruit in our lives. Jesus speaks of "a path," of "rocky ground," and of "thorns" that choke.

A path is a public place, a road that carries travelers; a path is the way of commerce, news, and knowledge. So the seed that was sown on the path is a symbol of our common public life. Symbols always point to a reality. A path is a road that is well traveled. The ground is beaten down by people in a hurry, people not interested in the journey, only in the destination. We are also people on paths, anxious to get to the next place, anxious to get through this pandemic, not noticing the signs and words of God along the way. Jesus says that the evil one snatches these words away, and so we hurry on, thinking of our destination, not expecting to encounter God on our path. In our hurry and anxiety on the well-beaten paths of life, we have become blind to the God who always walks alongside of us. God has not, nor will God ever leave us. We are the ones who do not notice God on our paths.

The rocky ground Jesus speaks of describes places that are difficult to navigate. Rocky ground is the contested terrain of our many commitments to family, work, community, friends, and nation. Distracted with life's commitments, we forget that God's word is always and already present in our relationships and commitments.

The thorns that Jesus speaks of are the cares of the world and its lure of material gain. The cares of the world always seem like a tangle of thorns. Our current cares and worries are indeed, thorny and prickly: A pandemic; the politics of an election year, racial and social issues again dividing a nation and world, communities and families at a distance; a struggling economy; learning to work from a distance; learning to learn from a distance. Right now our lives are a tangle of thorny problems that, if left untended, will choke us and any hope of hearing God's word of justice, mercy and love for our lives, our neighbors, and the world.

In a sense, Jesus is asking each of us, how do you care for the ground you walk on? Take care because that ground is sacred. Jesus is asking, how do you care for the good soil of your heart because it is created in God's image? How can God's word take root, and bear fruit in your life?

About 23 years ago, I began walking and praying in the mornings. My wife and I lived in Yamaguchi prefecture in southern Japan. I was very busy - too busy. I was the pastor of a two-point parish, I was chairperson of a Lutheran charitable foundation, and the president of the ELCA missionary association in Japan. I often flew to Tokyo every week for meetings, taking the first flight in the morning and coming home later that day on the last flight at night. I share my own experience because overwork and the cares of the world eventually landed me in the hospital. Feeling out of touch with God and physically drained, starting each day with a prayerful walk was a way to see anew God on my path each day. Walking and praying in the morning was simply a way to try to hear God's word in my life each day before feeling lost and tangled in the rocky & thorny cares of the day.

On my morning walks, I met people in my neighborhood, heard their stories, and became part of God's story in that place. Whenever I traveled on business, and it was a lot, I walked the cities wherever I was, praying on their well-beaten paths, on their rocky grounds, and in the midst of their thorny issues. I found that wherever I was, there was always time for prayer.

God says, "*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.*" How can we know God's thoughts and ways? During busy and stressful times in our lives and on our human journeys, do we regularly take time for prayer, for moments of quiet that will allow us to hear God's "still

small voice?”

As we travel over public paths, rocky ground, and through thorny issues of life, God’s word never ever leaves us. Jesus tells us quite clearly that God’s word is sown on every path, on rocky ground and among the thorny problems of life. God’s word is grace that will lead us, if we but take time to listen. Do we take time to listen for God in our lives? If we don’t then, as Jesus suggests, we will never notice the grace of God’s word *already present with us on our journeys*.

God is with you now. No matter the terrain of the roads we travel, no matter our concerns and problems, God’s missionary word goes out ahead of us, and meets us so that God’s purpose might be accomplished in our lives and in our world. God will renew and change our lives, but we must open our hearts daily. We must make prayer central to our lives. Find time for prayer. Find time to read. Turn off your technology. God is the only one who always broadcasts without any need for Wi-Fi, only an open heart and mind is needed for God to renew your life each day.

Amidst the cares of life and in illness, I learned that the only way to see God present in the world and in the face of my neighbor is in drawing my cares and my neighbor into prayer. God’s word is mission, and only God has the words of eternal life. Only God’s word of justice, mercy and love can change our hearts, renew our minds, and open our hands to change the world. Allow God to accomplish God’s purpose in your life and on your pathways, so that you become a sign of God’s eternal life in a world in desperate need of justice, unity, and love. Amen.