

God's Word Does Not Return Empty

Isaiah 55:10-13

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC; July 12, 2020

Just as rain and snow descend from the skies and don't go back until they've watered the earth, doing their work of making things grow and blossom, producing seed for farmers and food for the hungry, so will the words that come out of my mouth not come back empty-handed. They'll do the work I sent them to do, they'll complete the assignment I gave them. "So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause. No more thistles, but giant sequoias, no more thorn bushes, but stately pines— Monuments to me, to GOD, living and lasting evidence of GOD."

The words of God's mouth will not return empty! These prophetic words were spoken by the prophet Isaiah to people who desperately needed a word of hope after a long time in exile! They are words we all need to hear today as we grapple with the long exile of a pandemic amidst record numbers of new infections, political gridlock, the exile of injustice, including but not limited to racially based oppression. Our environment continues to suffer, people are still stuck at our borders trying to flee oppression and violence or to seek a better life. And we each carry particular burdens, some of which have been eclipsed by the more prominent concerns of our times. The prophet's powerful poetry and symbolism can speak to us a word of hope as they uplifted the people of his time.

Isaiah's people have been in Babylonian exile (today's Iraq) for generations after seeing Jerusalem devastated, families separated, land lost. Hope has dried up over the years of struggling through challenges of identity, belonging and survival.¹ Many of Isaiah's contemporaries may well have reached a point of giving up on God and their faith. However, Isaiah paints a picture of what will again be possible by the power of God's word to inspire people to embrace life anew. God's word is not just about how symbols and sounds create meaning in our minds. It is a generative force that moves us forward and changes us.² It has the very potential for growth and fecundity that is described in our text: *"Just as rain and snow descend from the skies and don't go back until they've watered the earth, doing their work of*

¹ I am drawing on a commentary on the text by Juliana Claassens (www.textweek.com).

² Christ is equated with this generative word in the prologue of the Gospel of John.

making things grow and blossom, producing seed for farmers and food for the hungry, so will the words that come out of my mouth not come back empty-handed.

Imagine what these words might have sounded like to people who lived in arid conditions. Rain and snow were rare and precious. Without them life could not be sustained in the current year. Without growth now, seeds could not grow that would sustain them in the coming years either. Now there is no need for worry, Isaiah prophesies, because the word of God will bring life. The prophet also promises that people will be moved to go out in joy, a movement reminiscent of the Exodus journey out of bondage into freedom, into wholeness and newness of life.³ Notice how it is nature that leads the parade! Mountains and hills burst into song, all trees will join in, applauding. Thistles and thorns, which are biblical symbols of judgment, will be replaced by giant sequoias like the ones depicted on our bulletin for today (thanks to Becky!). Stately pines will be lasting monuments to the truth of God's steadfastness, majesty, depth and beauty more than any monument we humans will ever erect or tear down as we struggle to tell our story with truth and integrity.

The image of this God-soaked world capable of transforming suffering can inspire us as well today. Since I have been speaking about the pandemic of the virus and racism several times recently, I would like to draw on a different context today as we remember the breadth and depth of both suffering and beauty in our lives. Let me tell about high school teacher Jeffrey Wright, his family and his "Law of Love" (<http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=3723>). I am sensitive to the fact that a teacher's impact on his student reminds us of the debate over whether to have students and teachers return to the classroom. I will not engage this question here though I realize how challenging all this has been for families. Thankfully, we know that teachers have been doing their utmost to connect with their students and families during these challenging times.

Now let me turn to Mr. Wright who is a physics teacher at Louisville Male High School which is now a co-ed multi-racial, multi-ethnic school. His students love him. "He holds the key to the city," as one student likes to put it. For one thing, you don't fall asleep in his class because he is

³ Although the people in the exodus story were often caught up in complaints rather than joy.

so creative and full of hands on experiments from exploding pumpkins to riding through the halls of the school on home-built contraptions. As he explores the laws of physics with students, he also wants to inspire his students to ask not only how something works but also why and to get curious about life.

Mr. Wright once even did a fakir stunt. He put a long board of nails across the length of his chest, had a student place a cinder block on top of it and then smash the block with a big hammer. Before the experiment one of the students asked, "Any last words Mr. Wright? Do you love us?" "More than you can know!" was his answer. Which leads us to the second reason why his students love him. Students of all colors say that they know that he cares about them as people.

One older female student shared how he reached out to her when he got the sense that something was wrong. She had been on her own since age 15. At first she thought, "Dude, you're a teacher. Why should I talk with you?" With time, she came to trust him and she often turns to him to talk something through. Other students have confided in him about being pregnant or having had an abortion or getting beaten up at home. They will tell him if they ran away from an abusive situation and where they are staying to be safe. Some of his students also deal with gunshots in their neighborhood on a regular basis. Jeffrey Wright knows that not everyone grew up in a safe home or neighborhood like he did. For Wright, every student deserves special attention and a "one size fits all" approach does not work as far as he is concerned.

He and his family know that "one size fits all" doesn't fit from their own experience. They have had to deal with challenges. These challenges have increased his own clarity about what really matters according to what this man of faith likes to call the "Law of Love." Wright and his wife have a healthy and delightful teenage daughter named Abbie who is a bit embarrassed by the shenanigans of her Dad. After their first born, they were also gifted with son Adam. Wright says that he immediately found himself fantasizing about going to games and plays. He knew from the start that he would want to support his little son wholeheartedly just like he supported his daughter. Shortly after Adam was born, the nurse alerted the family that she would need

immediate medical attention because he was breathing 180 a minute (or 3 times a second). Even years later, Adam still breathes 60 times a minute which is exhausting by itself. As it turns out, Adam was born with an extremely rare disease which largely leaves him unable to control his body although it is technically functional. Adam is in a wheelchair, in diapers, has to wear a helmet and can get very self-abusive when he gets scared or frustrated. At the beginning of this difficult journey, Adam was also blind.

Early on in this journey with Adam, Wright was feeling in exile as a man of faith. It seemed to him that God's word was not only coming to him as empty but cruel. He had to learn to let go of all his original dreams for his son. He found himself feeling unhinged and mad at God. Wright no longer cared about the "how" of how things work in the vast and mysterious universe but wanted to know why an innocent boy was suffering like this. What was the point? How would he ever get an answer to his question "why?"

It was an encounter between daughter Abbie and her little brother when they were younger that helped change Wright's experience and perspective. To Abbie, Adam was just her little brother and she decided to bring him into her room and play with him. As her Dad walked into her room, he saw Adam lying there among Abbie's dolls. When he asked Abbie what she was doing, she just said, "We are just playing, Daddy!" How could they play since Adam was blind, Wright wondered. "Dad, I hold things up to him and he tries to snatch them," Abbie explained. If Adam could do that, he must have regained some sight! And it was true. The family began to teach Adam sign language and the regular physical therapy was starting to pay dividends.

In time, father and son began to develop new ways to play. This could mean lying on the bed together with Adam who would roll his body in one direction and his dad would have to follow suit. Back and forth they would roll until Adam would rest his spindly little arm on his dad's chest. Wright started reading to him at night and more and more rituals were found to connect. One day, Adam signed a special message to his dad on his own initiative. Adam tapped his thumb to his forehead, crossed his arms on his chest and then pointed to his dad. He was signing: "Daddy, I love you!"

When Wright shares this moment with others, as he has done with his students, his voice breaks. He says that he now knows the real answer to the most profound version of the question: “why?” He is no longer asking why his son is suffering but why we all exist and how we can be sustained in life together. To Wright, things work because of love. Love is the answer to the question of why we exist which is the most existential question of all. Or as my teacher Jim Finley likes to say, “Love is our origin, love is our ground, love is our destiny.” Wright perceives this divine love which is both particular and universal. As God loves us into being so are we here to love and care for each other.

I would venture to say in light of our passage from Isaiah that Jeffrey Wright’s story shows us how God’s word does not come to us empty and does not return to God empty. This is so because God’s love, experienced through our relationships with each other, has the power to transform us. It has the power to turn arid land into a place of growth, to lead us out of exile into a place of true belonging. We have to be able to imagine possibilities and find our place in the midst of them. Jesus was always sowing seeds of such an imagination when he spoke of the realm of God. This realm is never imposed on us. It is there for us to enter together.

I hope and pray that as we dare to envision our lives in the midst of and beyond this pandemic, we will include in that vision also a community in which all people can thrive fairly and justly. May all beings be empowered to express through their very lives the very generative “word” of God. This includes Adam whose spindly little arms and hands have the gravity and force of the branches of a mighty sequoia when he signs God’s word of love for all to see. God’s word indeed does not return to God empty! All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.