

Isaiah 55:10-13

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Come! Listen! Live!

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, God speaks to us:

Rain and snow fall from the sky. But they don't return without watering the earth that produces seeds to plant and grain to eat.

That's how it is with my words. They don't return to me without doing everything I send them to do.

It's a simple illustration. Rain falls on the earth. The earth produces food, because that's what it does.

Similarly, God sends out his Word to do his will. We hear it and it produces life in us, because that's what the Word does.

It's straightforward. We don't earn or create salvation for ourselves any more than the barren earth produces a crop on its own. That only happens after rain. It is the same with us. On our own, we can do nothing. We can only wait for God's Word, which he unfailingly sends us.

Now, this is actually good news – gospel. We rely on God for everything. Not just physical stuff like rain and seasons, food, health and so on, but life itself, with a capital 'L'. Without God's Word, nothing happens, just like earth cannot produce seeds or food on its own.

There's much we don't understand about this, both physically and spiritually, but the principle is clear. God is the source, and we rely on him. Martin Luther wrote about these verses, *'For all the enemies say, "Do you really think that everything depends on the Word? We must act, work, and think." Here the text confounds their thoughts. He does not say, "Our works and our thoughts do this," but, "My Word." It is therefore a consolation for the purpose of lifting up the weak, lest they be offended at the lowliness of God, who has every victory in His Word.'*ⁱ

Thank God, the universe doesn't wait for us to understand how it works before the sun shines and the rain falls. There are far too many wonders in creation for us to know them all! These days we might think we know more than Isaiah did about rainfall, but we certainly don't know everything about how climate works. Behind every discovery lies mystery after mystery. Maybe Isaiah understood a few things about creation and how it works that we, with all our science, have actually forgotten.

Even more so, then, what a great relief it is that we don't need to understand everything about God's kingdom. But God's Word does tell us what we absolutely need to know. We call it the gospel. God loves us, loves the world, so much that Jesus gave his life to save us. He is the Word come down to earth, to water it and give it life. Come to him, listen to him, and live!

The LORD has done this. No doubt about it.

Luther, in his usual practical way, points out that Isaiah is not just painting a beautiful picture. It is practical comfort for those who fear that the Word of God is too weak to help us in our current state. He wrote, *'the Word seems so weak and foolish that there appears to be no strength in it. How can it be believed that all the power, victory, and triumph of God are in the word of a feeble human mouth? And so He comes to meet this scandal of the weak and the stubborn.'*ⁱⁱ

Like Isaiah, Luther points out that the Word of God comes to us in physical ways. Isaiah speaks of the word that comes out of God's mouth. In his case, that was the mouth of the prophet. For us it is the mouth of preaching and teaching, which God does through real people in real times and places – even when it is over the internet.

And this is why the church exists! If it is not speaking the Word of God, then it is empty and meaningless. Without the Word of God, it wouldn't matter how pious, correct, and holy we are. We could fight all the evil in the world, battle demons, conspiracies and heresies, but without the clear word of the gospel, God's saving, all inclusive love for us and the world, we will achieve nothing, be nothing.

We are to be the mouth of God, through which God's Word goes out to do what God wants. And what does God want? That everyone who believes in Jesus may not perish but may have eternal life.ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, the words we speak must be words of compassion and love.

This is why God created his church. And this is how the LCANZ plays a part in God's great, universal plan for his creation. We might be small. We might seem weak. We might not be as up to date and modern as some others are. Those things would be nice, and we keep working at them, but they're not why we're here. We're here for the Word, and the Word comes to us in weakness, even like a single drop of rain that lands on the parched earth.

Come! Listen! Live!

Writing to the exiles, Isaiah describes a world transformed. It is no longer a world captive, but a world released:

*When you are set free, you will celebrate and travel home in peace.
Mountains and hills will sing as you pass by, and trees will clap.
Cypress and myrtle trees will grow in fields once covered by thorns.
And then those trees will stand as a lasting witness to the glory of the Lord.*

Once more, this is picture language. Trees don't have hands with which to clap and mountains don't sing – at least, in as far as we know! But the point is clear. God's people are free. Their exile is over. Even creation is transformed as a sign of the joy and peace that comes with the LORD. We see everything in a new way. Where once we saw darkness, now we see light. Where once we were confused, now we have clarity. Where once we were afraid, now we are confident. Our exile is over – we are home.

The Lutheran Confessions link these verses directly to the ministry of Christian proclamation – what we call ordination.^{iv} It all links to the purpose and promises of God, the gospel which, as St Paul writes, is 'the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes' for 'the righteous will live by faith.'^v

This is not just a future hope, but a truth which, through faith, we experience now. Christian faith is not a waiting game in which we juggle the odds of an uncertain future, placing our bets this way or that. We aren't trying to appease an angry God or prove God's existence. We don't need to second guess God because faith is a lived experience, something we know at first hand. Knowing God changes our world. Our external circumstances may look the same, but we now have peace, joy, and comfort where before there was unrest, sadness and fear. Through the Word, through Christ, God's kingdom has come, just as we pray. Today, by faith, we already live in a new world of love, peace and joy.

As I think about our lives, and about our church, and as I listen to these verses, I am astounded at what I see. So much is similar. We might live in physical safety and comfort, but the longing for freedom remains. Human machinations to build a lasting, stable world have failed or seem to be failing. Society has turned a corner, away from faith. Ironically, in the western world we have never had so much stuff, but we feel our resources are stretched. The church is ageing – who will carry it forward? Personal ethics and morality are being replaced by virtue signalling and posts on social media. We can't free ourselves from the things that

threaten to overcome us. We are burdened, anxious, even trapped by events, by our lives, and by time itself. We feel like exiles, strangers in a strange land. Who will restore us and lead us home?

What better time can there be to hear God's invitation once more? Life in this world is temporary, we know that, but life in God is eternal. Salvation is freely available. Jesus sets us free. We are redeemed. Our captivity is over, because God's Word never goes back to him without having done everything he sent it to do, and he sent it for the salvation of the world.

Come! Listen! Live!

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

-
- ⁱ Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 17: Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40-66. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 17, p. 257). Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.
 - ⁱⁱ Ibid.
 - ⁱⁱⁱ John 3:16
 - ^{iv} Apology to the Augsburg Confession 13
 - ^v Romans 1:16