

Wild Hope

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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It is perhaps fitting that our 2 scripture texts use images of nature, planting, sowing and growth, after the events of the last couple weeks. On the one hand, we experienced the damaging effects of the wind and the many hours of cleaning up after it! And on the other hand, we have a wonderful community garden, where many of you spend many hours planting, sowing, tending and harvesting. Particularly at this time of year, we are attuned to the rhythms of nature and growing.

Both of these passages talk about the Word of God--where it goes, and the places where the word does and does not take root. When we hear the phrase, the Word of God, most of us probably think about a bound book--maybe it's well-worn from much use; maybe it's on a shelf some place. When we talk about the Word of God, we usually think of the written word.

However, this passage in Isaiah gives us an image of an active Word, not a passive, written word. This Word is one that goes out, and comes back; it is sent out from God's mouth, and it doesn't return empty; it accomplishes what it sets out to do; it succeeds in its purpose. This Word is a presence; it moves in the world; it gets things done. This Word is as reliable and predictable as the rain and snow, which come down from heaven, and don't return until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout with seed for the sower and food for the eater.

Isaiah preached these words to the Israelites who were in exile in Babylon. They had lost all hope of ever returning to their home. They heard the prophets' calls for them to live in ways that are just and upright, caring for the poor among them, worshipping God and keeping God's commandments. Exile is experienced as God's punishment for past mistakes. Words of judgement about hardship and lush vineyards becoming barren places of thorns and briars ring in their ears. These messages have been passed from neighbour to neighbour, from parent to child. There is no hope of an end to this exile.

Into this hopelessness and exile come Isaiah's words; this is a new message. No longer are these words of judgement, but now these are words of hope. Thorns and briars will be transformed into cypress and myrtle. They will go out in joy and be led back in peace--back to Jerusalem, back to their home. Oh this is good news! But can they trust it? How can they dare hope?

Just as they know that rain and snow fall and water the earth, so this Word is reliable and true. This Word will accomplish what it says; this Word will succeed in its purpose--a purpose of restoration and hope. This message of hope has been going on for a number of chapters. The chapters from Isaiah 40-55 are words of hope to those in exile. And this message of hope, this Word of God provides a bookend for this message: Isaiah 40:8 says that while the grass withers and the flower fades, the Word of God will stand forever. Then, here in chapter 55, the Word of God shall not return empty. This Word of God is enduring, it goes out, it doesn't return empty, it accomplishes its purpose, and it succeeds.

This is no passive Word. This Word is active, alive, and on the move. This Word is the same Word who was in the beginning; this is the Word who was with God; this is the Word who was God. This is the Word who became flesh and lived among us. This is the Word that the sower scatters as seed in all sorts of places.

The sower scatters this seed, this Word, indiscriminately, throwing it everywhere, on the path, on rocks, among thorns and on good soil. From our perspective, as farmers and gardeners in the 21st century, this does not seem like a wise practice. We calculate what kind of soil we have, and what plants will grow best in that particular soil. We add things to the soil to change it, to make it better, to try to improve the chances that our seeds will survive. We get rid of the rocks and thorns, we avoid the paths. We do not waste seed and plants. What was that farmer thinking?!

Farming has, of course, changed a lot in the time since Jesus told this parable. Seed was scattered by hand, so the wind often caught some of it and blew it onto places where the farmer did not intend it to go. But the farmer also would have known that scattering it liberally would ensure that more of

it would grow. But even the people listening to this parable, who knew the reality of how and where seeds grow, would have been shocked at the yield that the seeds produced in the good soil. A really good return on seeds was 10 bushels for every bushel of seed; a more average return was seven and a half bushels for every bushel of seed. (Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation commentary, p. 152) The yield of 30, 60 or 100 times is incredible....impossible.....way too good to be true. What an image of abundance and provision, of hope and good news! While 3/4 of the seed that was sown doesn't grow, what does grow yields more than is even possible.

Several things strike me about these 2 scripture texts. The first, and perhaps most profound, is that God's Word goes out into the world by no effort on our part. Just as the rain and snow fall through no effort or decision on our part, so God's Word goes out through no effort or decision on our part. God's Word is active, it has an agenda--a purpose--which does not need us. We are invited to join it--God wants partners in this mission--but we have no control over it. Just as the farmer scatters the seed, and gives up control over the yield, so God's Word goes into the world through no planning, or visioning, or committee meetings, or effort on our part. It will accomplish what it sets out to do; it will succeed in its purpose. It is up to us to notice and participate. But it is not under our control, or dependent on our initiative.

I find this somewhat freeing and somewhat daunting. It's freeing because it takes the pressure off of us to create and produce perfect programs. God's Word is active, and does unpredictable and awesome things on its own. But it is daunting, because I doubt my ability to be able to see God's Word at work in the world. Will I know it when I see it? And if I see it, will I join in? And what is my....our...role, if God's Word doesn't need us? And this realization is also humbling because it is hard to let go of my belief in my own ability; it's hard to realize that God doesn't need me in the way I think God needs me!

In the last 15 years or so, in the Mennonite Church, there has been much talk and focus on the missional church. These texts are a great example of God's mission of hope and restoration in the world, a mission characterized by abundance, a mission that is already happening. These texts are an invitation

to join God's mission, to be the presence, or Word of God, where we are; to look for the Word of God in our community. In the last couple weeks, chain saws have been the symbol of the missional church at work in the world, partnering with God's mission of hope and restoration. If the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus, and we, as followers of Jesus, are the Body of Christ here in the world, then the Word is embodied in us, if we allow ourselves to be partners in this way--to be sent out.

It is easy for us to interpret the parable of the sower in ways that talk about the 4 kinds of soil and label them good or bad. What is perhaps striking is that as I have thought about the different kinds of soil, I have realized that at many points in my life, I am like each of these different kinds of soil. Perhaps you recognize them too, in your own life, or in the life of the church. Maybe it's the well-worn paths of our own beliefs, which resist taking in anything new. Or maybe it's the thorny places of anger, resentment or discontent, which choke out any opportunities for new insight or new beginnings; or maybe it's the thorns of doubt and disbelief that find it easier to be cynical than hopeful. Maybe it's the rocky places of good intentions and initial excitement and vision, but the obligations, distractions and demands of life are barriers to deep roots and lasting change. It is a wonder that any seed grows at all!

And yet, there are those experiences which take root and grow; there are places in our lives where we can see the abundant yield of opening ourselves to new seeds, new beliefs, new ways of being; healed relationships, conversations of honesty and vulnerability where we allow ourselves to see someone in a new way, or to be seen in a new way, or the times we are willing to explore a situation from a new perspective. There are places in our lives and our world that are yielding abundance and hope--organizations in our community that provide food and shelter for those who lack; gardens where seeds are being planted and crops grown for use in local food banks; or corners of our denomination where honest conversations are happening and relationships are being nurtured and developed that offer hope of continued relationship and new understandings; our own street, in the midst of the chaos of trees and branches left by the storm was a place where neighbours and friends and church members came together to clear up the mess. Surely, these are signs of God's abundant yield of hope and restoration.

Perhaps the thing to ponder is not so much about the soil that we see around us--the receptivity of our community or our context to the Word of God--but about how God's Word is living and taking root in us. Perhaps we need to ponder our own thorny beds, or rocky places or well-worn paths, and how God's Word might be wanting to work up those well-worn paths, turn over those rocks, or examine those thorns.

One other piece about first century farming was that the seed was sown first, and then the ground was worked up, so there was opportunity for those rocky, well-trod and thorny places to become receptive places for growth. (Richard Gardner, *Matthew*, Believers Church Bible Commentary, p. 211)

Maybe it's not so much about us hearing the Word of God, as it is about how the Word of God is working up the soil in our lives and living in us. Maybe it's not so much about what we are doing, as what God is doing in us. How open are we to God's mission in the world? How receptive are we to what God wants to do in our lives and in the world?

God is sowing seeds, indiscriminately and extravagantly--in our lives, in our community and in our world. In God's eyes, all soil is given the opportunity to produce fruit. How are we tending the soil of our lives? How is God's Word alive within us, so that we can be sent out in joy, and return in peace?