

The Word Works to Accomplish What God Desires

*(Isaiah 55:10-11) As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, {11} so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Tell me, have you noticed even though we are at the very end of July, our lawns are still green and growing? I mean, there are some years when after a week of vacation, my lawn looked exactly the same as when I left it, only a little browner. But not this year. First thing I had to do when I got back on Friday was to get out the lawn mower. Why is that? Well, I think you know. This year, the good Lord has seen fit to shower our region with an abundant amount of rain. And that rain has certainly had an impact on our landscape. The lawns are green, the tomatoes are growing, the sweet corn is juicy, and the duck marshes are filled to the brim with water. These are all the positive effects of God sending abundant moisture from the sky.

Well, in our text for today, God draws a parallel between the rain he sends and the words he speaks. And the point he is making is that both these things—the rain and his Word—are sent for a purpose. They have an intended outcome. They both produce some kind of positive result.

And really, that's the point that we want to focus on today, namely, that when God gives us his word, that word has an impact on human hearts and lives. Or, to put it another way, simply stated,

The Word Works!

Or more specifically,

The Word Works to Accomplish What God Desires

Here, through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, God offers an analogy taken from the world of nature. God says, *“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater”*... In other words, from the time that precipitation falls to the earth and before it evaporates back up into the sky, that moisture has an effect; it does things. It waters the earth, it causes seeds to sprout and plants to grow, which in turn produce more seeds, some of which are used to make things like bread and pastries and my mom's homemade muffins that I got to enjoy this week. Those are all good things that came into being, in part, because God first sent rain from heaven.

But now God goes on to draw the parallel truth. Just as the rain comes down and has a positive effect... *“so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”* In other words, when God speaks, that is, when the word of God is proclaimed, when the Holy Scriptures are read and taught, that word doesn't come back empty-handed. It doesn't fail to accomplish what God sent it to do. The trick is to recognize what work God expects his Word to do. For example, if I were to say, the Word of God works for healing the common cold—just lay a Bible on your chest--or the word of God works for getting a stain out of your pants—just rub a little Scripture into it—you would rightfully say, “No, God never promised that his Word would work for that purpose. No rather, God promises that his word will accomplish what he desires.”

And what is it that God desires? Well, God tells us pretty clearly in 1 Timothy 2:4. “*God our Savior wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*” There's God's number one purpose for sending his Word into the world. And by “Word” I mean both his written word, namely, the Holy Scriptures, and his “Word in the flesh,” namely, Jesus Christ. Both were sent by God so that all mankind could come to a knowledge of the truth and thus be saved eternally.

And recognize that God has given his word the power to accomplish that task. How does Saint Paul put it? “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16).* The word has the ability to create and sustain saving faith. Or you think of the words of Paul to young Timothy. *From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation faith in Jesus Christ. (2 Timothy 3 15).* You might say that that is God’s number one purpose for sending his word to the world. St. John put it best, didn't he? “*These words are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)* God’s Word has the power to accomplish what God intends, namely, saving faith in Jesus.

My friends, if you can say that Jesus is your God and Savior then you can be assured that God’s Word has done its work. It has accomplished what God desires. Like the rain that falls from the sky, God's word has not returned to God empty-handed. Praise God for that.

But now maybe there's a little voice inside your head saying, “Yeah, but does God’s Word always work? Aren't there times when people hear the Word and they don't believe it? How can God say that his word always accomplishes what he desires? How can God say his word never comes back empty handed?” Would anyone like to come up and answer that question? Okay, then I'll try to answer it with two words that you don't often hear. The Lutheran confessions teach that the scriptures are always efficacious, but not always effective. What does that mean? That means that the word of God always has the power to turn unbelieving hearts into believing hearts. The word of God has that efficacy. But that doesn't mean it always happens. The word is not some kind of irresistible force that coerces people to believe. Sometimes human beings, in their own perversity, simply refuse to believe. You think about Stephen’s words to the Jewish leaders. After he preached this historic message about God's plan of salvation for the Jews, and right before they responded by stoning him to death, Stephen spoke these words, “*You stiff-necked people. You are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit. (Acts 7:51).* Or you think of Jesus’ words as he thought about the people of Jerusalem who had rejected him as their savior. “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”*

In other words, when the word of God is rejected by the hardness of human hearts, it's not that the word is to blame. It's not that the word is somehow defective. It's the human heart that is defective. It's the human heart that's hard, kind of like the path that some of the good seed fell on in Jesus’ parable. It's not the seed that was the problem. It was the soil.

But again, maybe you are wrestling with this. You are thinking, “Yeah, if the word of God is sometimes rejected by human hearts, can you really say that, in the words of Isaiah, the word accomplished what God desires and achieved the purpose for which God sent it? Didn't the word fail to accomplish what God desires? Not exactly. Here I have to give you two more theological words. We need to distinguish God's antecedent will and God's consequent will. God's antecedent will is his overarching desire, first and foremost. We heard it before. God wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. But God is not going to force that

on anyone. If in the hardness of the human heart, a person says, "I reject God. I don't want you. I don't believe your word." Then God's consequent will kicks in. Do you see the word consequence in there? It's not what God originally wanted to do. This is what God does as a consequence of human actions or attitudes. Or to put it another way, when a human spends his whole life saying, in effect, "God, I don't want you to be my God, I don't trust you, I don't believe you, I don't want you in my life," in the end, God, in his consequent will says, "Okay, I'm going to give you what you want. And that's a life forever without me."

But even when that is the sad consequence of someone's rejecting the gospel, that doesn't mean that the Word of God that was spoken to that person was wasted. God's task for the Word was still carried out, even if in this case the task was to show that God is just and right in giving people what they want, namely, hell.

My point is this. Even when it looks like the word is not working, even when people are not believing in Jesus, the word is still at work. Remember both halves of Mark 16:16. That passage begins, "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.* That's God's antecedent will. But that passage goes on to say, *but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*" That's God's consequent will. In the end, both will be accomplished.

And yet, I have to say that that's not the primary emphasis of this passage. The real emphasis is not on the bad things that happen to people when they reject God's Word. No, the real emphasis is on the good things that God produces in human hearts when we hear and believe his Word. And really, you are all living proof of those good things. You know what it means to hear God say, "Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven." You know the peace that comes from knowing that your times are in God's hands. You know what it means that nothing can separate you from God's love—not disease, not death, not persecution. I had someone say to me recently, "Pastor, never felt so at peace as I did as I was walking out of church last week." Friends, what is that, other than the Word at work? It's God's gospel promises, that in spite of our faults and failures, God still loves us in Christ. He's made us his own. He's prepared a place in heaven for us.

Do you realize how important those promises are for keeping our faith alive and growing, at every stage of our lives, including the end of our lives? As our bodies start to wear out, as our minds begin to slip, it's all the more important for our souls to be fed. Isn't that why we as a congregation have called a visitation pastor, to serve our homebound members? As our loved ones draw ever closer to the finish line, they need the encouragement that only God's word can provide. You can be sure that that's what Pastor Bode has been bringing our shut-ins for the last 11 years. And Pastor Stensberg before him. And going forward, Pastor Gorske. When these ministers of the gospel visit our homebound members, they don't bring the latest vitamin regimen. They don't say, "Hey I've got this new exercise routine for you today. How about some brain teasers to keep your mind sharp?" No, they bring truly life-saving medicine. They bring the one thing needful. They bring the most precious treasure in the world. They bring God's holy word and precious sacrament. They bring the only food keep anyone's faith alive and growing. It's the water of God that keeps the garden of our hearts alive and bearing fruit.

My friends, I trust that you feel a debt of gratitude to people like Pastor Bode who have so faithfully served our shut-ins with the gospel these past 11 years. I ask that you will pray for Pastor Gorske as he begins to serve in that same capacity, in your stead. But most importantly, I pray that you will never stop marveling at the work that God has done, and continues to do in your heart and life, through his holy, inspired and inerrant Word. Just as God sends the rain, so he sends you his Word. Soak it up, every chance you get. Drink it in. And you can be sure that

God's Word will not come back empty handed, but will accomplish what God desires, for your good and his glory, in Jesus Christ. Amen.