

## *Seeding Kingdom Amid Empire*

Isaiah 55: 8-13      Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

We've talked about God's economic sense before. According to worldly economic standards, God is a moron. God simply gives it all away, doesn't take a profit, doesn't seem to be nearly as discerning as an intelligent investor should be, makes deals with bad risks, and frankly seems like an easy mark. It's no way to run an operation and bears no resemblance to anything we're familiar with in the business world.

Of course, God's grace, love, compassion, and generous providence are not the hallmarks of commercial enterprise, but of family. God is the worst doting parent, and may even be God's own worst enemy by enabling all kinds of unhelpful behavior. We have to wonder about God because it seems like this strategy really does nothing for God's project in the world, the building of the Kingdom, the advancement of human creation to treat each other as brothers and sisters, as one family that works together and shares together and values each other completely, that has a heart and spirit of compassion, grace, and generosity.

Today's scriptures invite us to take a look at God's process for bringing hope and new life into a world that frankly doesn't seem all that interested in it. Some prefer to have it their way by judging everything on their own terms, while others are mostly indifferent and shrug their shoulders at matters that don't directly affect them, and others are content so long as they're getting enough of what they want, and others raise the white flag and surrender when they realize the idealistic nature and vast scope of what God is seeking to do. In their own way, each would say that God seems to have this foolish project that's frankly implausible and impossible. Perhaps you've heard something like this: 'It's better simply to deal with what matters to me; everyone takes care of themselves, end of discussion. Why should I care about those other people and their issues. Let them worry about their own issues and I'll worry about mine.'

Isaiah 55 is the ending of what's called Second Isaiah, written in the period when liberation from Babylonian captivity was imminent or occurring. The Babylonians had been conquered by the Persians who had a different strategy for dealing with imperial occupation. They believed in keeping people in place or returning them to their homeland rather than carting them off and enslaving them, encouraging them to prosper in their homeland, allowing them to engage their cultural and religious beliefs and practices however they wanted, and reaping the benefits of their prosperity for the Persian Kingdom. They didn't have to deal as much with uprisings from resentful subjects, and skimming off a healthy chunk of the profits was quite enriching. The Persians pioneered a system of imperial power that would be duplicated by most imperial powers, like the Romans, afterward.

Isaiah recognizes this as God's deliverance of God's people. The yoke of punishment had been lifted and God's had sent a messiah to save God's people. No, not Jesus; rather it was Cyrus the Great, Emperor of Persia, who was acknowledged as God's messiah who was returning God's people to the Promised Land.

Isaiah 55 starts with an invitation to the thirsty to come and drink, to the penniless to buy and eat.

Wait a minute – the penniless are invited to buy stuff? *Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.* There is God’s ridiculous economics at work again. God is literally giving it away with no desire to make a good return on his investment, doesn’t care if the debt gets repaid, and is just fine giving away the abundance of his blessings. God’s restaurant could never survive in the real world.

Why does God do this, acting in a way that we cannot imagine in our common life experience? We expect the cost, to pay down the debt, to have a levy placed against us. There is no free lunch, right? Yet not so from God who tells us at the beginning of today’s selection:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

God wants us to know that God has his own independent and sovereign purpose, one that exceeds our reasoning, understanding, judgment, or scrutiny. God’s got plans that we’ll never figure out. Get your faith life in order; you’re going to need it.

The passage sprints through the life cycle – rain and snow water the earth, plants sprout and bring seeds, seeds get sown, makes bread, and eats it. That really tight sequence is a metaphor for how God’s word goes forth from God’s mouth and accomplishes what God desires and fulfills God’s purpose. In this time of liberation, God’s word has gone forth to Cyrus of Persia, and it fulfills God’s sacred purpose, the liberation and return of God’s people to the Promised Land.

This raining of blessing from God has transformed the potential for the land. While we have the processional praise of all of nature, *For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands,* we also have the very substantial change in what the land is bringing forth: *Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle.*

Tall, proud trees rise up from where painful thorn and brier had reflected the plight of God’s people. Now they would be able to stand on their Promised Land, restored as a people by their God.

We see the power of God’s word, God’s covenant promise of new life being fulfilled. We see God’s people transformed by the power of God’s word, seeding new life amid the despair and decay that had been their yoke borne in their exile from God.

Jesus’ telling of the parable of the sower also seeks to describe the power of God’s word, God’s covenant of new life for God’s people. Jesus’ story concerns a farmer who sowed the seed for his crops in the custom of farmers in that time, by hand using

broadcast or throwing. The farmer in this metaphor is God. God is doing the usual sloppy job in the divine economy, scattering seed all over the place. A good farmer would be far more careful sowing to ensure that the seed went where it would be most productive. God isn't like that. God is tossing the seed everywhere it seems in some reckless abandon. But clearly, the seed is going everywhere just as God's promise goes to everyone. All of God's people, in whatever condition they're in, are literally getting pelted by seed, by the blessing of God's promise.

The seed that falls on the path have fallen on packed earth and can't take root, and the seed becomes feed for opportunistic birds. The seed falling among the rocks found scant earth and couldn't survive the heat of the day. There was seed that fell among the thorns and weeds, and those competitors ended up choking the new plants. Finally, the seed on the good soil got everything it was supposed to have and produced a wondrous harvest, many times what was sown. Actually the yields of a hundred, sixty, and thirty fold are rather unusual. It seems that when the message of the kingdom finds good soil, the reward is never just average or pretty good like four to ten fold which would be great. No, it's always amazing in its excellence – 100, 60 and 30 fold.

Of course, Jesus wasn't giving a lesson on farming techniques or how to improve crop yields. He later explains the parable to his typically dazed and confused disciples that the parable was referring to how the message of God's promise and God's kingdom takes hold of the believer, or not, and what blessings result when the power of God's word gets finds good soil among the faithful.

Gaining the harvest is an ongoing process of planting, growing and reaping. In a similar manner, the seed of God's word and its promise of blessing is continually being sown, scattered everywhere. Yet it's always seeking that good soil on which it might bear the exceptional harvest. It is not a single event parable, but a description of life pattern and process, of God's promise and God's Kingdom taking root amid the typically hostile conditions of Empire.

We should carry out the implications further. We may think that the path, the rocks and the thorns are unchanging. But if they're metaphors for the state of a person's faith, aren't they also subject to change? The road may be re-claimed by the farmer, and the traffic re-routed. Or the rocks may be removed, or the brambles and thorns cleared out in other seasons of planting. In the same way, a person who is unprepared to receive, grow, and bear fruit in God's word in one season may be much better prepared in another.

Finally, we should also perceive the three levels of the good harvest from good soil. Not all good soil produces the same yield. Like a tag line for a diet pill commercial, "Results may vary." That's shorthand for "everyone is different, does different things, and does them differently as well as sees them differently." The outcomes cannot be predicted. Each is blessed according to what blessing is received.

What we can see and affirm clearly is that the promise of God goes forward. As was said in the Isaiah passage, God's word doesn't return empty. God's word can do miraculous things.

God is not thwarted the powers that claim supremacy in human life – shorthand for Empire. Empire is the worldly power that seeks to usurp the sovereignty of God, that would play God over life and death. Empire blesses some with prosperity and curses others with poverty, providing health or allowing sickness, demanding accountability from others while accepting none for your people, judging by law instead of by spirit, condemning instead of being compassionate, raising individual rights over community well-being. It demands our loyalty, our faith in its rhetoric, its historic destiny, its uniqueness, its excellence, and above all, its promise of abundant blessing. Sowing seeds amid Empire ensures that the hard soil, the thorns, and the weeds will claim their fair share of God's wild attempts at planting the seed of new life promise, of establishing Kingdom amid Empire. But God keeps scattering the seed of Kingdom in every season.

The changing seasons for the sower and the changing conditions of the soil remind us of the changing seasons in our life's story and circumstances, and in the spirit in our community and society. We may see the conversion of our own spirit from road, rock, or thorn into good soil.

But we should also be aware of the reverse. The seed that once found good soil can change and become corrupted as it's trampled, or falls prey to predators, or become a junkyards for debris and distractions, or becomes neglected as corrupt things grow and prosper. The power of Empire never stops striving to gain your allegiance, your faith in its promises. The temptation is to take things for granted. That trap encourages complacency, neglect, and weakness, a tragic mix that can spiritually bankrupt those once prosperous in promise and in blessing.

Know that the promise of God is always sown wildly and generously, pressing forward, always seeking to work in you. In every season, God seeks the good soil in you so that you might bear a bountiful harvest for God's Kingdom.

May that miraculous blessing in God's word always find in your life and in your spirit the good soil to grow in abundance. And may you yield a harvest for the Kingdom in whatever blessing God graciously grants to you.