

Growing Thoughts

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

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As I might have mentioned several times, I've joined the ranks of coronavirus gardeners this spring and summer. There are lots of us new gardeners apparently. Seed companies are running out of seeds. Most every gardener in the world is smarter about it than I am, but I have harvested a double handful of potatoes, I ate them, and they didn't hurt me. I also am the proud parent of two teeny tiny baby tomatoes from plants I planted too late in the year. My newest accomplishment is successfully starting some more tomato plants from seeds I smushed out of some almost rotten grape tomatoes in my fridge. My intention is to plant them outside so I can have some grape tomatoes in the fall. In the meantime, I talk sweet to my baby tomatoes on the windowsill and my baby tomatoes outside. Daisy guards the outside tomatoes from predators, mainly squirrels and birds.

I think several of you will understand me, when I say that growing things has been a great comfort and outlet for me in these weird months of virus and quarantine. Gardening was never something I had taken the time to do or cultivate (ha) any interest in. But it's been good to have a reason to go outside, to connect with something that feels real and visible and concrete. Failures, like the poor chili pepper plant that died within 24 hours of being planted, aren't devastating, but just the way things go. And when a new leaf appears, or a bloom pops out, or miracle of miracles—a real tomato sprouts, well, it's pretty great. And having that direct connection to growing things and nature has made me feel God's presence in a more immediate way. And I've desperately needed that. I think several of you have made the same discovery, and you probably have more tomatoes to show for it.

Scripture, Old Testament and New, uses agricultural, gardening, growing stories and metaphors to explain God. It makes sense. Everybody, well, every regular person maybe not emperors or Pharaohs, had to know how to grow things, because they needed to eat. And they had to be way better at it than I am, because they needed more than a double handful of potatoes and two tomatoes. Their survival, and the survival of their families, depended on being able to grow things. And as they didn't have running water in a hose attached to their home, they depended even more on rain than we do as modern people. Everyone knows that rain water is better than hose water, but hose water is a whole lot easier than hauling water from the Jordan River or Sea of Galilee to water your crops.

So the Bible is full of poetry and stories about rain, about seeds and growing and planting and being fruitful. Because it was vital to their survival, people would immediately understand those kinds of comparisons and allusions.

Isaiah 55 is just one example. The parable of the sower from Matthew that Beth read is another, one of many that Jesus told. In the parable of the sower, the way that Jesus explains it, the soil is the agent in the parable that has power. The soil determines whether or how the seed sprouts and grows. Growth and a fruitful yield depend on the soil. The sower just spreads the seed everywhere, wastefully, really, and the soil is the actor.

In the imagery of Isaiah 55, water is the agent with power. Here's verse 10: *For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the*

earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater..." Do you see the difference. The rain and snow are the actors, not the soil. The rains water the earth, which makes the seed grow, and provides both food to eat and seed for the next season's crops. Without the rain, nothing happens.

And the rain and snow come from heaven. The next verse makes clear what we're supposed to identify as the all-powerful rain and snow: *so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

God's word is the agent with power to make things grow and be fruitful, for Isaiah. Here, in contrast to the parable, the soil doesn't determine what happens, the sower isn't responsible either, nor the seed itself. It's the water, which doesn't even appear in the parable by the way, but is clearly crucial to growing anything.

God's word comes to us like rain, which in case you haven't noticed, is outside of our control. We can ask for it, we can hope for it, we can expect it on certain days when the weather forecasters tell us to, or when our own observations tell us to, but we can't make it rain. We can't make God's word come to us or anyone else, to any particular person that we think really might need to hear a word from God at any particular moment.

Which is frustrating. We'd like for God's word to be at our beck and call and direction. But not being in control of God's word is a blessing. Because it comes to us when we need it, not when we think we need it or wish for it, but when we really need it. And it comes to other people when they need it, too. We need to keep our eyes open and look for it, of course. But the blessing of God's word will come, even if we forget to ask for it.

And God's word is effective. As sure as the rain makes the grass grow and the pastures turn green, as sure as the rain nourishes the seeds waiting underground, as sure as the rain fills tanks and rivers and lakes, as sure as the rain washes the air and trees clean, so is God's word sure to do what it's supposed to. God's word shall accomplish God's purposes, and succeed in doing what God sent it to do.

Now that is a reassuring thing to hear this morning. God's word will be successful. God's rain will water all kinds of soil, so that seeds can sprout and bear a fruitful crop.

Even though God promises here that God's word will do what God needs it to do, there are things we can do to join in God's purposes. Our soil, our hearts, our faith, can be well tended and cared for. We can prepare our soil by all of the things that strengthen our faith: Scripture and prayer and worship and loving God and loving our neighbor.

And we can join in God's purposes by planting seeds ourselves, so that they are there, waiting to be watered from heaven, so they can sprout and grow and bear fruit. We plant seeds by loving our neighbor, too, in word and deed, by loving the least of these as members of our own family.

As we join in God's purposes, by tending to the soil of our own hearts, and by planting seeds in others' hearts, we always need to remember that it is God's word that gives the rain we all need to grow, and God's purposes are carried out. In the midst of a literal drought of hot and dry days strung one after another, and in the midst of what might be for you a spiritual drought, with difficulties and setbacks piling up one after another, let's remember and rest in the assurance that *God* sends the rain and God's word will not return empty but will accomplish God's purposes.