

“Cultivating Life”

Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13;
Luke 13:1-9

February 28, 2016
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Oftentimes I will have somebody come to me and say, “The Old Testament is just full of wrath and judgment.” And then I listen to something like this Isaiah passage, and here God is saying, “Come to me because I want to be in covenant with you. I want to be in relationship with you. I want you to know my sure and steadfast love so that you may live.”

When I hear that, I think maybe we should look at what is going on and see why God might be a little bit upset because it feels to me that over and over again there were some reasons God might be upset in the Old Testament. We will get to that in a minute in Paul.

But here we see in this passage in Isaiah this desire of God: Turn and come to me that I may give you life. It sometimes feels like that’s just the opposite of what we’re told today—coming to God doesn’t give us life. But here, we are reminded from Isaiah that it’s just the opposite.

Then he goes on to say things like “my thoughts are not your thoughts, your ways are not my ways.” I sometimes wonder about that, but with the way things are going in the world today I sure hope that’s the case because it feels we need somebody whose thoughts are greater than ours, whose ways are better than ours. Indeed, we think about who God is and how great God is, and perhaps God knows a thing or two more than we do. Yet, there’s this struggle. God, in Isaiah, is offering, “Turn to me and come. I want to be in relationship with you. I want to show you my steadfast, sure love. I want to be there for you so that I can take you into life.”

Paul is looking back and reminding us of what happened and why it didn’t work all the time. The first thing he points to is this thing called idolatry: trusting in something other than God to have all the answers, to show us the way, to give us what we want, to satisfy our lives. It’s giving our loyalty, our life to something other than God and expecting it to work. It says they got up to play. It probably means they went into an idolatrous situation where they went to dance—erotic dancing is basically what it was pointing to. So they are challenging what was important. Was it God, or was it simply our human need which we think we can satisfy ourselves in some other way?

Then it goes on to talk about them complaining and how they were complaining in the desert even though they had God to guide them. What it makes me think about first is the nature of complaint. What’s a complaint? In a way, it is saying things are not living up to my expectation. You’re not doing it right, and I know how to do it better. If you would just ask me I would tell you. Think about saying that to God.

Idolatry is the external idea that we're going to give our thoughts, our selves, our trust to something other than God. Complaining is the internal or self-centered idea. God, I've got this; if you would just do it my way.

Paul goes on to say to be careful when you feel like you're standing, because it's in those times, in those places of pride, when we struggle most. It's interesting that we sang the song "Good, Good Father" this morning because I was thinking how as a parent bringing up children how many times my children were frustrated with me because I didn't let them do something they wanted to do or I made them do something they didn't want to do. There are those times when, as a parent trying to do what's right with your children, they're not always going to be happy with what you do, and yet you are trying to do what's right.

Remember we talked about God as having thoughts that are beyond our thoughts and ways that are beyond our ways. Think about God as a parent in that way. Perhaps there are times when we are going to get frustrated in life and things are not going to go the way we want them to go and perhaps there's somebody else who can show us the way through that. So this idea of God being able to do that.

Jesus is following on this same theme of saying God wants to have us turn and come and cultivate our lives, give us good lives. The struggle is the turning and coming. It's wonderful the way Jesus starts off this piece of the passage because in a way he's saying because there's a tragedy doesn't mean you can make a judgment on people. I think that's very helpful to know that not all tragedy is something that would lead us to judge someone else. He goes on to give us a warning as well.

What's fascinating to me is that as we've looked at Isaiah and Paul and then as we hear from Jesus, God wants to give us things. There are really three things that God wants to give us. He wants to give us guidance, goals, and gifts. You might think of it as the manure that gets spread around that tree. If we think about it, really, when Jesus comes he's giving us those three things. He's teaching us, guiding us. He gives us parables like this one to help us think. He interprets the events of the world and he helps us think about ways to live our lives. He gives us a new commandment to love everyone as he has loved us. He helps us recognize the greatest commandments: love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves. He give us that guidance.

In a way, that is also a goal for our lives. What is the goal of our lives? Is it to produce good spiritual fruit? Is it to be a loving and kind and gentle person? Is it to have good relationships with folks? Because sometimes the world tells us there are other goals—to get ahead at any cost, to undercut others, to put others down so we can get ahead. I think Jesus gives us very different goals.

He gives us gifts. He gives us the gift of grace, that we can make mistakes and try again. He gives us the idea that God loves us, and really if we think about it, could any of us make it through life without gifts? We need the gift of other people's love. You

can see what happens when young people don't get that. We need the gift of guidance. We need the gift of fellowship. Sometimes we need the gift of a hand up, help in times of trouble. We need the guidance, goals and gifts that Jesus gives us.

The thing I'm hearing in each of these passages is that we often can look at that, we know all this. I'm not sure I'm saying anything all that new. The thing that I see is that oftentimes it feels like we say, yes, Jesus has some nice stuff, good stuff and there's some really ethical and moral stuff there and throughout scripture it gives that kind of idea. It's worth thinking about, but I have to live my life. I think there is a disconnect that goes on between what Jesus is talking about and what we do. It is that disconnect that Jesus is talking about to the people of his time, to the Galileans and the people of Jerusalem.

We tend to take this passage metaphorically, but what if Jesus is suggesting that something real is going to happen if they don't turn a different direction, if they don't learn to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them, if they go the road of violence instead, which is what they do because in 66-70 there is a war in which the temple is destroyed and many people are killed and there is a dispersal of the Jewish population.

Jesus wants to give us guidance, goals, and gifts. I think we may see these as just nice things to think about and we don't really pay attention to them. But I think there are real consequences to our lives, our world. If we say those are nice, but we go somewhere else, the world goes somewhere else with us because we make our world. As wild as that is, God has given that as a gift as well. Sometimes it feels more like a curse to me, but it's a gift that how we live affects the world we live in.

Jesus gives us a lot of guidance, a lot of goals, and the gift of grace, and it's up to us to decide if we're going to pay attention, to live as he calls us. Isaiah says God gives us all of this that we may live. The incredible thing is that it's important how each of us pays attention to what he teaches us. It's the ways we live that make the world we live in. Amen.