

Isaiah 55:10-13

This past week, on several days, there was rain in the forecast. As I looked out the window one morning, I saw a neighbor who walks by the house almost every day, pass by. He lives about 1/2 of a mile away. The sky looked dark and on the verge of a heavy rainstorm. I was concerned that he would get caught in a downpour. So, I headed to get my coat, thinking...I'll just get my car and offer him a ride home. I started putting on my raincoat and shoes, and then.....I... stopped. It hit me that I couldn't do this. There would be no way that we could socially distance, and he wasn't wearing a mask.

It was a sad reminder of living in the midst of a pandemic. I said a prayer for him, and decided to head out in my car to run an errand. As I was leaving, I saw a woman out running. She too is a neighbor, but I do not know exactly where she lives. She smiled at me, and I returned a smile, but added a worried look, because of the weather. On my trip back, I saw her again. She was still running, but this time heading, I believe, toward her home. And now, it was raining, and she was soaking wet! Again, I thought... I wish I could stop and give her a ride home! But, I couldn't take any chances. I need to stay healthy, especially now that we are having Drive-In worship services. I need to stay healthy for all of you and anyone I might need to visit in the hospital.

I prayed for the woman who was running, too. Thinking of her and the man out walking earlier, reminded me that they did not seem concerned about the possibility of rain. The man was walking briskly, but he didn't look worried. The woman who was running in the rain did not seem upset. She actually seemed fine. She could have perhaps gone up on someone's porch for protection from the rain. But she didn't. She kept running even as the raindrops continued to fall.

Rain, water, going forth, heading home, and how we see God's word in the sustenance of all creation, are a part of our Old Testament lesson today. It is taken from the Book of Isaiah at

the end of the section attributed to Second Isaiah. This section begins in Chapter 40, and includes the familiar verse, "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8, NRSV)

The context of our Old Testament passage is the time after the Babylonian Exile when many of the exiles are returning home. The people had sinned against God, and some were taken captive. Not all of the Israelite people from Judah were taken, but those who were, were now released. This journey of freedom perhaps brought reminders to their minds of their ancestors and the Exodus of the Israelite people from Egypt. Unlike their ancestors, the Israelites who had been in Babylonian captivity were allowed to continue worshiping and expressing their faith. But they were, nevertheless, away from home, perhaps away from their families and friends, and many longed to return to Judah and begin rebuilding the temple that had been destroyed. Their release from captivity was an example of God's love for them. God was with them all the time, as God continued to be with them afterwards.

The opening verse of our passage reminds us that the water in both rain and snow is essential to us. Yet, we also know that at times we see them as nuisances. This can happen when we are out walking or running and we are caught in the rain, or when these elements are coupled with high winds, lightening, or blizzard conditions. But, our pericope is a reminder that water is important. It is life producing and life sustaining for all of God's creation. For the earth and every living thing, needs water! Some parts of the earth, like Wisconsin with its 15,074 lakes (Wikipedia) and Minnesota with its 11,842 lakes (mpr online), have not only these places for water to collect, but many rivers, streams, and ponds. Yet we know that other areas of the earth have none. They have deserts and mountains; parched areas that require rain or snow to provide sustenance for crops, livestock, and human beings. Those among us who are farmers or

gardeners, know this well: Water is essential to our well-being and our very lives.

Our Old Testament passage encourages us to look beyond the physical rain and snow to its basis: water. As human beings, we can only survive for 3-4 days without water. While we can go for about 3-weeks without food, water is crucially important, because our bodies are made up of at least 60% water. (Reuters/Francois Lenoir, online) Water is essential to our lives; it is essential to our very existence. So, our passage is truly about more than rain, snow and water. It is about something else that God believes is as essential to our lives as water. Our very existence, our lives depend on God's word. This passage is not about our works, for we cannot produce rain or snow or water. Rather, it is about God's word and the work of the Holy Spirit, living and active in our lives, sustaining us in this time of the pandemic, nurturing us in times of hardship and challenge, restoring us through God's life-giving word.

We have probably all watched the rain fall on a summer's day. Sometimes slowly, raindrop by raindrop, and other times pouring as if the heavens had opened and were dousing us with every drop in every cloud. Perhaps during these times, we see the rain as a challenge. But if we think of another image, we can picture the rain watering the flowers, grass, trees, and filling the rivers and streams with more water. This is a pleasing image; one of new birth with sprouts coming up from the earth; of sustenance for all that God has created; of renewal for plants and grass that has withered. All is watered and life begins, continues, or is restored.

Our scripture passage also mentions snow, and the image is that of snow "watering the earth." This image may be mixed for us, as well. We know that heavy snows do come. Snowflake upon snowflake that creates mounds of snow, and at times even causes us to have to cancel Sunday worship! Do we think of this snow as a sign of birth, sustenance, or renewal of God's creation. Maybe not. Perhaps for those who enjoy outdoor sports it may be so. But, for

most of us, it brings thoughts of shoveling, plowing, trudging through snow drifts, etc...

Our scripture passage encourages us to see the rain and the snow as happy images. We are to envision the raindrops and snowflakes as God's word. Now we can imagine not only raindrop upon raindrop in a pleasing way, but snowflake upon snowflake; God's word coming down to us, blanketing us when we are outside; blanketing our houses and God's church; and blanketing all of God's creation. God's word coming to us, no matter what our circumstances. It brings to us thoughts of God's great mercy and faithfulness. It reminds us of God the father sending Jesus to earth, to atone for the sins of all humanity through his death on the cross. God the father, who sent Jesus, the Word made flesh, so that we would have forgiveness of sins and new life in him. God's mercy for the exiles from Egypt, God's mercy for the exiles from Babylonia, and God's mercy for all of us during this time of the pandemic and beyond. Like the rain and the snow that God provides, God's word is life-giving and life-sustaining. It is an example of God's grace. It is an example of God's love poured out for us.

As we recall the Israelites returning from captivity, we realize that this passage represents a homecoming. It is a celebration! It is a time that they are looking forward to. It is like our return to worshipping together once again in this new way. It is a joyful time in which God's word of scripture, preaching and song fills us with that which is essential to our lives; God's word. For God's word fulfills its purpose! It feeds our human souls. It does not return to God empty, but does with God intends it to do. And we, and all of creation rejoice! Through this passage we can envision the mountains and the hills breaking forth into song. For God's word and work is for all creation. The life-giving rain and snow comes from God. It cannot be produced by us or any of God's creation. God's word is necessary for all of creation's existence. And the scripture passage describes creation's joy--"the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song

and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." (vs. 55:12b, NRSV) Instead of seeing thorns and briars, we will see the myrtle and cypress that God has created. These will be the on-going, everlasting signs of all of creation's relationship with God.

Rain, snow, myrtle, cypress, other trees, mountains, hills, and all of God's creation, rejoices in hearing God's word. May this challenging time remind us that God has the ability to transform. God has the ability to provide all the sustenance that we need. God has the ability to restore, for God's word achieves its purposes and accomplishes what it was set out to do. When we hear God's word, it works in us, renewing us, sustaining us, and changing us into the persons God wants us to be. Let us go forth with joy, rejoicing with all of God's creation in God's life-giving word. Thanks be to God. Amen.