Building in Faith: Seek the Lord Memory Verse: Isaiah 55:6

Oct. 23rd, 2022 Scripture Reading: Exodus 18:22-23

SLIDE 1: TITLE

Today we conclude our talk about “Building in Faith”, at least at it pertains to this series. We have worked through a couple of chapters from Isaiah. We have been described as a barren church, but even so, we ought to rejoice and plan for abundance. Enlarge our tents and don’t hold back! We have been told not to fear and have heard of the incredible, almost unbelievable promises of God. And we have been asked to “Come, buy and eat, to listen to God’s word and to look carefully for those we don’t know coming to us.” In the background of all of this has been our push to collect funds for a new pavilion and today we kind of sum it all up. But first a little parable:

It was a normal week. The kids were working hard in school, things were busy for Dad at the office and mom had just recently recovered from a bout of illness. Overall, these parents were just hanging on in the busyness of it all. They decided they needed to have a nice family weekend. A little trip away with some fun activities and a chance to refresh and get a little break. Well, if you know anything about family trips, they are a far cry from getting a “little break”. The workload for mom and dad just increases:

**SLIDE 2: Vacation**

The packing, the timing, the planning, the contingency planning, the strategies to keep the kids busy, the strategies to keep them from attacking one another, the plans for food, the disciplinary policies that should be put into place, the plans for paying for it all. Did I mention planning?

 Well, for parents, this kind of work, all these plans, might accurately be called a “labor of love.” Sure, the parents will have fun, but they do it on behalf of the kids. And the kids, for their part, are not responsible for the planning. They just get to go along for the ride and enjoy the trip. They don’t worry about budgeting or any such details. But for mom and dad, it is work, before, during and after such a trip.

 So, these parents loosely laid out some plans and finally told the kids what they were thinking of doing during the coming weekend. It involved something having to do with Wisconsin Dells and water slides and such. They were excited and looking forward to it, and so the week the went on. But y’know every once in a while, you just have one of those bad mood risin’ kind of weeks. A week in which every single child drastically disappoints, behavior is out of hand, every button is pushed, every line crossed, and every envelope pushed…I may be overstating the case a bit, but the point is, that following week was full of arguments, stubbornness, and entitlement. A very potent cocktail. Mom and Dad were run ragged that week and we were despairing of the possibility of having a happy, healthy family. They didn’t know what to do. Finally, it hit the father…not what to do, but something he dare not do…He could not take these kids on the trip that had been planned. He could not reward them with such a fun time. He knew that there had to be a consequence to the week’s actions. He knew we had to change the plans and take away the fun trip.

 This little family story does in many ways reflect the story of God’s people in the Old Testament, except that in the case of the Israelites, they were already at the waterpark!

**SLIDE 3: the Israelites, they were already at the waterpark!**

As a loving Heavenly Father, God wants good things for his children. He provided for them wonderful plans which he carried out on their behalf. Remember, we talked about the action-based *hesed* love of God. But the people had drunk deeply that potent cocktail. They were argumentative, stubborn, and entitled. They did not live into God’s ways. And eventually, after enough time had passed and this attitude persisted, he exiled his people form this Promised Land waterpark. His good plan for his people changed and their reality became exile, desolation, barrenness.

 I do believe this is also the reality for many churches in the West. We talked about this a few weeks ago. The Church, especially in our country and the UK, is in and has been in a definite downtrend. The United Methodist Church, of which we are a part, is in and has been in a definite downtrend. Have we drunk the cocktail? Are we argumentative? Are we stubborn? Are we entitled?

 One of the problems here is that when this fun family trip was cancelled, all of the kids were affected. Were some more guilty than others? Of course! Were any of them without fault? Certainly not! Yet, the trip was a no go for all. Fair or unfair, the fate of each child was wrapped up in the fate of their siblings. They would go on the trip all together, or they would stay home all together.

 I have often struggled with this side of God. How does this intertwining of fates work with individuals and people groups? And I am not alone in asking these questions. In Genesis chapter 18 Abraham pleads with God for the fate of the city of Sodom. God had deemed the city to be so full of wickedness and violence that he was going to destroy it altogether. Abraham understood that destroying an entire city will also bring judgement against some who are righteous and good. Abraham understood that that would be unfair.

**SLIDE 4: “God, it’s not like you to punish the innocent with the guilty.”**

So, he pleads with God, he says, “God, it’s not like you to punish the innocent with the guilty.” And he talks God down to the number ten. And God agrees. “If there are ten innocent men in the city of Sodom, I will not destroy it for their sakes.”

 So what is God’s ratio? According to Genesis 18, it was pretty low. We don’t know the actual population of Sodom, but it was a major city at the time. So, when God’s people are exiled from the Promised Land waterpark, were there only nine righteous men in all of Israel? Is it the case, that as a nation, they fell below the line of acceptability, so then they must be judged? I get the sense that God does not work by such a rigid formula.

 What scripture does show us is that those who walk with God are judged by a higher standard. That is, the closer we get in our walk with God, more responsible we are for that walk. Why would that be? Because we know better! I might accept certain behaviors, such as throwing tantrums, from my 2-year-old, but I would never let anything like that stand with my older kids. Is that unfair? Is that a different standard? Maybe, but it is a simple fact, they know better. They can communicate more effectively. They have a different relationship with me as their father. They will be held more responsible. And so the closer we get in our walk with God, the more responsible we are for that walk.

 In the New Testament, followers of Jesus are described as leaven worked throughout a batch of dough. We are here, partly, to up that ratio, to be the faithful followers in a mass population of violence and selfishness. We are here to be responsible, not only for our personal walk with God, but also for the fate of those around us. Just like siblings in a family, we want our fellow human beings to be tied to our fate, which is eternal salvation. So like salt and light, God scatters us out into the bland, dark world.

 So, as we finally turn to our passage for today, we can actually sum up the whole sermon in three words, the whole life of a Christian in three words, and we read them right here in Isaiah 55: 6 “Seek the Lord.” Last week we talked about the previous imperatives found earlier in the chapter: Come! Listen! Look! This one encapsulates all of these: Seek the Lord! It is a call to action on our part. Yes, God has come to you, yes, God is the One who is all-powerful, yes, God is in control, and yet, despite all that we are told outright…Seek him! Love him with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. READ 6-7

**SLIDE 5: “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” Isaiah 55:6-7**

 So, seeking involves repentance, a turning from former way and past behaviors into a new way of living. This turning is actually a re-turning as we see in verse 7. Now we get to talk about planning. READ 8-9.

**SLIDE 6: “My plans aren’t your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans.” Isaiah 55:8-9**

The plain truth of the matter is, we do not get to know the details of God’s plans. The timetable is his, the outcomes are his, the itinerary is all his. Our job is to seek. We are the children; he is the Father. We go along for the ride and obey. We can certainly ask. “Where are we going? How long before we get there? Can we stop at that place?” But we can also be okay with hearing answers like: “You’ll see”, “Not yet,” “Just trust me.” At the end of the day, we do not want to try to carry the burden of the planning. That is not the fun part of the trip. Leave that stuff to the Parent! So not only can we trust in God’s plans, but we can also be grateful that we did not have to come up with them! READ 10-11.

**SLIDE 7: “Just as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and don’t return there without watering the earth, making it conceive and yield plants and providing seed to the sower and food to the eater, so is my word that comes from my mouth; it does not return to me empty. Instead, it does what I want, and accomplishes what I intend.” Isaiah 55:10-11**

God’s word is compared here to precipitation, that comes down from heaven and nourishes the earth. Just like rain, God’s word is something we can’t live without. If we want to be a healthy, hearty, fruitful, thriving branch, we need to be rooted in the life-giving water of God’s word. And just like a seed, God’s word begins to grow something new. But I love the conclusion to this thought…God says, “My word does not return empty, but it accomplishes what I want.” So again, we are the child here. We are not about to have our entitled inclinations met and get whatever we demand. God is our Father. He will have his way. READ 12-13.

**SLIDE 8: “Yes, you will go out with celebration, and you will be brought back in peace. Even the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you; all the trees of the field will clap their hands. In place of the thorn the cypress will grow; in place of the nettle the myrtle will grow. This will attest to the Lord’s stature, an enduring reminder that won’t be removed..” Isaiah 55:12-13**

The end result of all this is joy, celebration, even the trees join in! I have always enjoyed being outside especially at this time of year.

SLIDE 9: Starry Night

Sometimes I will go out after dark and wander into the field out behind our neighborhood. It is amazing to see the stars on a clear night, and to experience the sheer silence. But if the breeze begins to blow, well then the trees start to clap their hands don’t they? And the silence can actually become quite loud depending on how many trees are nearby. Whenever you hear the wind blow through the leaves, remember that every part of this creation rejoices in the promises of God.

 So again, church, I implore you, seek the Lord! He has the plan, we are here to go along for the ride! His word is the rain that we need to live and when we live according to it, we will go out with celebration. I just want to reiterate that growth and vibrancy in our church will not come from simply building a new pavilion outside. But it will come as a result of our turning to the Lord and seeking after his plans. This he has promised. Amen.