

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift  
*A Vision for Thanksgiving*

Isaiah 55:6-13

THE INTRODUCTION

When the army of the Babylonian Empire invaded Jerusalem in 597 BC, it took the Jewish king, his family, skilled craftsmen, warriors, and about 10,000 prominent citizens into deportation. Ten years later the Babylonians punished a Jewish rebellion by destroying Jerusalem and its Temple and deporting *other* citizens, leaving the rest to fend for themselves in Judah. "The Exile" as it has been labeled was a time of trial for both groups. Those in Babylon were not free to leave, but on the whole, they were allowed to make a life in this strange land; those in Judah were less well off, barely surviving a famine. But both groups had to deal with difficult faith questions, such as: "Has God forgotten us?" and "What did we do wrong that led us into this political predicament?"

The portion of Isaiah from which we read last Sunday and this morning's text both come from near the end of the 70-year Exile. The prophet speaks words of comfort and surprising promise that God will forgive and bring about a return to their homeland.

THE READING

<sup>6</sup> Seek the Lord while he may be found,

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call upon him while he is near;

<sup>7</sup> let the wicked forsake their way,

and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,

and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

<sup>8</sup> For my thoughts are not your thoughts,

nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

<sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts.

<sup>10</sup> 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,  
<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,  
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

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#### SERMON:

Over the last few weeks, Steve and I have been trying to finalize our Thanksgiving plans: where we'll go, or who will come to our place, and what we'll eat. Since our son, Nathan, and his wife, Alena, divide their time between her family and us, we offered to get together with them at a different time or on a different day. So a text came from him last week: "Let's do brunch." Hmm, I thought, a Thanksgiving brunch? What do you eat, I wonder? Although I know it will be fine and fun and good, **I admit I'm having a little trouble imagining what Thanksgiving will look like this year!**

It must also have been difficult for the Jews during their exile from Judah to imagine their own traditions differently. "What would their religious festivals be like in Babylon?" Families were divided or at a distance; there was different farming and different foods in Babylon. Having been raised in the Mid-west, I recall my first *Southern* Thanksgiving with the Vandergrifts; I'd never had collard greens, black-eyed peas, squash casserole, or sweet potato pie at a Thanksgiving!

But much more significant than the menu for the people of Judah would have been the realization that they were no longer powerful or influential. It wasn't their country; the Babylonians ruled. They were no longer free. Oh, they were allowed to make a living and to contribute to the empire, but there was no way out of this foreign place. As things dragged on, they might have been tempted to mournfully sing with Peggy Lee: "Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that's all there is, my friend, then let's keep dancing. Let's break out the booze and have a ball, *if that's all there is.*"

Besides this, they were away from the Temple and their religious rituals, all of which had assured them of God's presence and favor. *Now*, they wondered about God. "Why did this happen to us? Do we have a future? What do we have to be thankful for anymore?"

If their situation resonates with you at all today, with your personal life or family circumstances, your relationship with the church, or your feelings about the nation and world, then let's look more closely at the words of the prophet Isaiah, for they were uttered and intended to give the Exiles hope.

**More to the point, in our quest for a meaningful Thanksgiving, Isaiah gives them and us an opportunity to explore the *theological* reason for the holiday – what it's *really* about.**

There are two parts to examine. **First**, verses 8-9.

Father Cavanaugh, the priest in the Notre Dame football movie, *Rudy*, sums these verses up pretty well. Trying to encourage the young man, he says: "In thirty-five years of theological study, one thing I know for sure: God exists, and I'm *not* him!"

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways mine," God says. "My ways and thoughts are as high as the heavens from the earth compared to yours." God sees what's going on and us from a different, elevated plane. God's ways are wiser, more loving, the plans of the Divine more perfect than those we make, and God has a vision *beyond* what we can see, one that transcends our human limitations.

This future that God foresees for them and for us is poetically described in verses 12-13. It is more than just going home to Jerusalem. It is Joy, Peace, Singing mountains, and Clapping Trees. The judgment of the thorn and the briar will be replaced by the justice of the cypress and the myrtle – a future that's fertile instead of futile.

I find this word to be good news, especially in our time, because it means that God has in mind a different society than ours, and a better self than I am right now. It's aspirational. **In other words, God's vision gives us something to reach for, which is truly something to be thankful for this holiday!**

Right on the heels of verse 9 come verses 10-11 – **part two**. We should *never* feel defeated by the height of God's thoughts, ways, plans, and vision, because this section reminds us that God *wants* us to "get it" and to be able to live into the vision, so the Almighty sends us her word. God takes steps to communicate the vision to us in ways we *can* grasp. I remember a Sunday school class for adults in which they were studying a particularly challenging biblical text, and a student pleaded with me: "Break it down for us!" Well, God is like a *good* and able teacher, who makes accessible what otherwise would be beyond us. Verse 11 says that the high and transcending God promises to come to us through God's Word – in language that we can apprehend.

A while back, Steve and I watched the controversial 2016 film called *The Birth of the Nation* – by Nate Parker. It tells the story of Nat Turner before he turned to vengeance, a culmination to his story that I can't condone as a Christian. But in the beginning, a slave in Virginia, Turner became a Baptist preacher. In order to quell the spirit of a building rebellion, slave owners in the region forced him to preach to the oppressed and keep them in their place. They preferred texts like "Slaves obey your masters," but as he grew in this assignment and saw the suffering of his people, Turner selected *other* scriptures, and the Word of God did what it was intended to do. In one scene, with the owners looking on, Turner quotes Psalm 96: "O sing to the Lord a new song! The Lord will judge the peoples with equity. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy, for God is coming. Oh, may you sing a new song!" and we get to see the effect of the Word upon the downtrodden, who were assembled before him; like thirsty plants they soak it up, and the light of God's vision shines in their eyes as he speaks.

As Isaiah affirms, the Word and vision of God is like snow and rain, sent from heaven. (How appropriate that it is raining this morning.) It comes down from on high, waters the earth, flows into tight spaces, goes around obstacles, even erodes obstacles over time. The word, like water, trickles into the soil, saturating it to the roots of the vegetation – to the souls of human beings and across the soul of

society – UNTIL it has succeeded in its mission from above. As Isaiah promises: “My word will not return to me empty; it *will* accomplish that for which I have sent it.”

In Isaiah’s time God’s word eventually even gets to Cyrus, king of Persia, who in his victory over the Babylonians will proclaim release to the captives and let the exiles return to Jerusalem. After seventy years in this foreign place, they will be allowed to rebuild the Temple. If God’s Word can touch Cyrus, **God’s Word can get to *us* too!**

**Therefore, the same God who gives us something to reach for, reaches *us* so that the vision can become reality!**

Now, *there’s* something else to be thankful for! Making this Thursday, rain or shine, wherever we are, whatever we eat, and no matter who is at our table, a *true* Thanksgiving!