

When the Rain Comes

Bible reference: Isaiah 55:10-13

*¹⁰For 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,
¹¹so 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.*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some years you can drive for hundreds of kilometers through the Australian countryside and see little but dust, grey paddocks and tired gum trees. The dams are low. The creek beds have become walking tracks. Farmers lift their eyes to the horizon, searching for clouds that promise rain but drift away without delivering it.



Then, one day, the rain comes.

At first, almost nothing seems different. The earth quietly drinks it in. The paddocks are still brown. The trees still look lifeless. There is no sudden transformation.

But something has begun.



Days later, tiny shoots appear. Weeks later, the landscape has changed. Birds return. Wildflowers emerge. The smell of damp earth fills the air. Life that seemed lost was quietly waiting beneath the surface all along.

Rain has a gentle way of changing the world. It does not force life into the earth. It simply gives what the earth has been longing to receive.

It is no surprise, then, that Isaiah reaches for rain when he wants to describe the way God works.

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth... 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.”

Isaiah speaks these words to people who know what it is to wait. They are living in exile. Jerusalem lies in ruins. The temple has been destroyed. Everything that once gave them security seems to have disappeared. It would have been easy to wonder whether God’s promises had dried up.

Into that uncertainty Isaiah offers no explanation for their suffering. Instead, he offers a promise wrapped in an image they understand.

God’s Word is like rain.

Rain does its most important work quietly. Long before anyone notices green shoots, moisture has already reached deep into the soil. Life begins where no one can see it.

Isaiah says that is how God’s Word works. It accomplishes God’s purpose even while we are wondering whether anything is happening at all.

That is not always easy for us to believe. We live in a world that expects immediate results. We want quick answers to prayer, visible success and problems resolved without delay. We measure progress by what we can see.

God’s kingdom rarely grows that way.

God’s Word often works beneath the surface before it transforms what is visible. Long before hope appears, grace is already at work.

Perhaps that is one of the deepest acts of faith: trusting that God is already at work, even when our lives still look like dry paddocks waiting for rain.

Isaiah makes a remarkable promise. God’s Word never returns empty.



Sometimes that promise seems difficult to believe. Week after week we gather for worship. The Scriptures are read. The gospel is proclaimed. We confess our sins and hear forgiveness. Bread is broken. Wine is shared. Sometimes we leave filled with joy. At other times we wonder whether anything has changed.

Isaiah gently reminds us not to judge the rain while it is still soaking into the ground.

Martin Luther loved these verses because they reminded him that the Church does not finally depend upon human ability but upon God’s living Word. Reflecting on Isaiah, he observed that we naturally think everything depends on our plans, our wisdom or our efforts. But God says something wonderfully freeing: “My Word.”

Luther wrote that God has every victory in his Word. Just as the richest soil cannot produce a harvest without rain, the Church cannot create faith by its own strength. Life comes through the gift God gives.

That is why Luther treasured what we know as the means of grace. Whenever the Scriptures are read, Christ is proclaimed, forgiveness is spoken, people are baptised, and the Lord's table is prepared, God is doing far more than reminding us of the past. God is acting in the present. The risen Christ still speaks. The Spirit still waters thirsty hearts. Grace still takes root in lives, often long before anyone notices its fruit.

John's Gospel helps us hear Isaiah's promise in an even richer way. "In the beginning was the Word." The Word through whom all things were created became flesh and lived among us.

Jesus does not simply speak God's promise. He is God's promise.

Wherever Jesus goes, life begins to appear. The blind receive sight. The hungry are fed. Those pushed to the edges discover they belong again. Sinners hear forgiveness. Even the dead are called by name. In Jesus we see what Isaiah meant. God's Word does exactly what God sends it to do.

Yet there was a day when everything suggested that God's Word had failed.

The disciples stood beneath the cross and saw only defeat. The authorities believed they had silenced Jesus. The crowds assumed the story had reached its end.

But Good Friday was not the end of God's purpose. It was the place where God's purpose was being fulfilled.

On Easter morning the women came expecting to care for a body. Instead, they heard the astonishing news: "He is not here; he has been raised." Only then did they begin to understand that God's Word never fails. Even when all appears lost, God is already bringing into being a future beyond our imagining.

That pattern runs throughout Scripture and throughout our lives. God brings life from death, hope from despair and new beginnings from endings we thought were final.

Isaiah understands that. He never pretends exile did not happen. He never asks God's people to ignore their grief. Instead, he says, "You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace."

Joy begins before the journey is over. Peace accompanies God's people while restoration is still unfolding.

That has always been the way of faith. Abraham set out without knowing where he was going. Moses crossed the wilderness before reaching the promised land. The disciples followed Jesus long before they understood who he truly was.

Faith is not possessing certainty about tomorrow. It is trusting the One who walks with us today.

Then Isaiah lifts our eyes even higher.

"The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

What a wonderful picture. Creation itself joins the celebration.

Isaiah reminds us that God's salvation is never only about individuals. God's purpose embraces the whole creation. The God who renews human hearts is also making all things new.

We know how important that is in Australia. We have seen landscapes scarred by drought, bushfires and floods. We also know the joy of seeing country renewed after rain. Isaiah invites us to recognise those moments as echoes of God's greater promise. Whenever we care for creation, restore damaged places or nurture life, we participate in God's hope for a renewed world.

The prophet's final image is full of quiet confidence.

"Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle."

God does not deny the existence of thorns. God transforms them.

That is what we see in the risen Christ. His scars remain, but they are no longer signs of defeat. They have become signs of life.

Perhaps many of us can recognise something similar in our own lives. Looking back, we can see experiences that once seemed only painful but, in time, became places where grace took root. A disappointment opened another door. A season of waiting deepened our faith. A loss enlarged our compassion.

At the time we could not see what God was doing.

Only later did we realise that God's Word had been quietly at work beneath the surface all along.

Isaiah leaves us with one last picture. The rain gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater.

God always provides both.

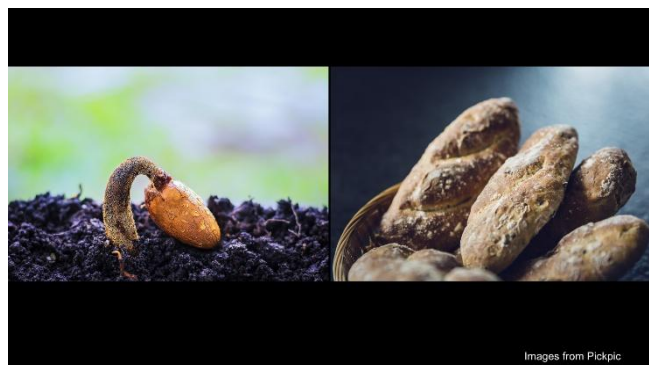
Bread for today. Seed for tomorrow.

Every Sunday Christ gathers us around Word and Sacrament. He feeds us, forgives us and strengthens us. Then he sends us into the world carrying seed: a word of encouragement, an act of kindness, patient listening, generous hospitality or quiet compassion.

Most of those seeds will grow beyond our sight. We may never know how God uses the ordinary faithfulness of our daily lives. We do not need to know.

The harvest belongs to God.

Our calling is simply to keep sowing, trusting that God's Word continues to accomplish what God intends.



Perhaps this week you will notice rain soaking into dry ground, the smell of damp earth, or fresh green shoots beside the road. When you do, remember Isaiah.

Remember that God has always worked like this: quietly, patiently and faithfully.

Long before anyone sees the harvest, new life has already begun.

And because the living Word has come among us, died for us and been raised for us, we can trust that no part of our lives is beyond God's renewing grace.

The rain still falls.

God's Word still speaks.

Christ still gives life.

And one day the whole creation will rejoice in the fulfilment of God's promise.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page <https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>