

# *Thoughts of Turning and Returning*

*Isaiah 55:6-9*

Someone asked me last week when the limited seating in the sanctuary will go away. Inevitably someone will make the comment at the close of the service, “Oh, pastor, are we shaking hands now?” To wear a mask or dispense with it altogether is a topic of debate in nearly every corner of post-pandemic America. There seem to be a lot of opinions on what life should look like today. Even among Christians who share a common faith in our Lord Jesus Christ random thoughts on the subject reveal a disparaging disunity. How we hold it all together and reach out in love to our neighbor is more challenging than ever before, but it’s not impossible in our current culture. Unity of the communion of saints is not unattainable. Our Lord finds a way for us to not only exist beside each other, but thrive and grow even in the midst of a myriad of thoughts and opinions in the kingdom.

This is the third time this year that our reading from the Old Testament has directed our attention to chapter fifty-five of Isaiah. We’ve visited the first five verses and the last four earlier in the year. Now the lection for the day plants us smack-dab in the middle of the chapter. Most of us have become familiar with these words, having heard them at various times in the past. The bit about God’s thoughts not being compatible with our own, and His ways way higher than ours strikes a chord with us. They remind us that in the midst of our chaos and indecision, amidst the hazy smoke screen that blankets our frail human ability to grant understanding, God’s will and God’s way remains supremely intact. Some things will always remain a mystery to us this side of eternity. We shake our heads and wring our hands at the injustice, at how some lives matter more than others, at how people can act so violently to drive a certain point home. It all seems pointless, and we wonder why Jesus doesn’t just come and put an end to it all just as He’s promised.

And then there’s you, dear Christian friend. There’s you with all that you carry in addition to that which the world loads on. You have your fragile relationships that barely hang together. You have your pet vices that won’t go away and leave you peace. You have loved ones hold up in some locked down nursing facility that you long to see and others you wish were there. You have teachers pushing you to think a

certain way that is in opposition to your own Christian values, but the grade lies in the balance. What are you going to do? Where will you end up? Is there any semblance of sanity in the midst of man's inhumanity to man? It's no wonder we come to church, to the sanctuary, to this place where God has promised to meet us. Sacred spaces are increasingly becoming few and fewer in our world. The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh wars against and threatens to put to death the new life in Christ that is ours.

Light pierces our darkness and the smoke and mirrors are pulled back in a word of God that descends on us. God chooses to speak to us in no uncertain terms, bringing forth hope in the future and peace for the present. It is a word of tender compassion and abundant pardon which He brings for the downtrodden and wearied pilgrim. "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near" (v. 6). That's not a harsh command, an impersonal demand to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. In the greater context of the chapter, it's a gracious invitation to come—"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!" (v. 1). God knows your frail human condition. He knows you're on the verge of losing it altogether, that your world is decaying all around you. Seek Him in the sanctuary He's provided you. Call upon Him in the nearness of Word and Sacraments. These are the means of grace He's provided for the forgiveness of your sins. Don't despair! There yet is hope.

"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts" (v. 7a). What does that forsaking look like? How are these impending unrighteous thoughts dismissed completely? The Psalmist affords wisdom and incite when he writes by holy inspiration, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (Psalm 1 ESV). And since the Lord knows the way of the righteous, take great comfort in the midst of your suffering. Trust God to make a way out for you. Don't hesitate to call upon Him in the day of trouble, for He has promised saying, "I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me" (Ps. 50:15).

You can be sure that God will not turn a cold shoulder to you when you seek His face always. He will not treat us as our sins deserve, but in the act of turning from wickedness and unrighteous thoughts the Lord will meet us with open arms. To such a one who makes confession with contrite heart and desires to amend a sinful life, the Lord stands ready to have compassion for He will abundantly pardon. You wonder how this can be possible...how sin can be washed away wholly and completely. You can hardly believe that God can be near when everything around you indicates the opposite is true. How could God possibly restore a cursed vanity of vanities? But you must remember, dear fallen creature, that “as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts” (v. 9).

September finds us in the latter days of 2020, a year that has been decidedly marked by significant changes to carefree lifestyles and what it means to be my brother's keeper. It will be interesting to see what the history books will say of it. We know that pandemics have happened before, and you can be sure that they will come again. Living with viruses is part and parcel of life in this fallen world where sin and death and devil still reach their wicked tentacles, seeking to snuff the life out of us. We seek out politicians who will diadem the right. We call upon elected leaders to bring calm out of strife, and we go about shaking heads and wringing hands when it doesn't go our way. But as Christians, men and women redeemed by the blood of Jesus, let's remember that in the year of our Lord 2020 we are among the found in Christ and the fellowship to which He has drawn nigh. Our times are in His hands. Though His thoughts and ways extend far beyond our frail ability to grant understanding, nevertheless, Christ reigns. Remember what He did for you when He was born of the virgin Mother, how He went about doing good and healing the sick, how He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. Remember in this year 2020 how Jesus pierced through the haze of our darkness as the Light of the world, essentially rewriting all history in the glory of His resurrection from the dead. That we might be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness (Small Catechism) Jesus Christ was given unto death for you.

And now you have the distinct honor of knowing Him, embracing Him, laying hold of Him in His sanctuary where bread is His very Body and wine is His very blood given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins. And now you, dear fellow redeemed creature of God, have the distinct honor of calling Him Father who has washed away your sins in Holy Baptism. United with Jesus' death and born again in His resurrec-

tion from the dead, you no longer live as a people without hope even in a year of pandemic pandemonium. You believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Thanks be to God! Amen.