

Our verse this morning which we have been sitting with the whole month is Isaiah 55. As RG taught us in his sermon at the beginning of the month, the first half of the book of Isaiah is written right before the siege of Jerusalem, right before the Babylonian empire would wage an unrelenting war on the promised land. The army of Babylon did not stop until the Temple was in ruins, until the city was rubble and ash, until all survivors were made slaves.

The Hebrew people were living through an apocalypse. The end of life as they knew it, the end of their home, of their place of worship, maybe the end of their relationship with God altogether, who could say?

It seemed to be the end of the world.

And yet.

Our text this morning is from what some scholars call Second Isaiah. It was written on the eve of the fall of Babylon. About fifty years *after* the siege of Jerusalem the Persian army is at gates of Babylon and Babylon is not strong enough to hold them off, no, empires are not forever and neither is the apocalypse. Miraculously, somehow, after a generation of enslavement the Hebrew people are free to return to their homeland.

This verse is the last of what some scholars call the ‘comfort passages,’ verses that give hope to a traumatized people, that give assurance of God’s goodness and love and providence. “Come,,” God says, “drink wine and eat bread that have no cost.” I know the way you have been living in Babylon, everything has been a battle, but that is not going to be the way it is going to be anymore. God declares just a few verses earlier in Isaiah

43, “I will make a way through the wilderness, rivers in dry land” And at the beginning of Isaiah 55, “Come, *all* who are thirsty.”

It is hard for us to understand the value of free water, free bread to a people who’ve been at the bottom of the social order for fifty years, having to scrape by, having to live without, having to bear the violence and humiliation of a brutal empire.

Water is life. Not just symbolically but literally.

The promises God makes in Isaiah are of an abundant life for all people. At its face, this is an absurd promise to make and an absurd promise to believe. It is absurd to think that thorn bushes could be transformed into myrtle, that a desert could be transformed into a lush fertile oasis.

We are much more accustomed to stories of transformation that are about destruction, deforestation, desertification. We are much more accustomed to news about wildfires and the end of life as we know it and it’s hard to even think of a story of a restorative regenerative transformation like the one God promises in Isaiah 55.

As I was writing this sermon, though, I was reminded of a project called “Greening The Desert,” where permaculture gardeners have been working for 20 years to transform ten acres of desert in the Jordan River Valley into a food forest. It only rains two or three

times a year in this place. The soil is rocky and dry. Every drop of water in the desert needed to be stored, or recycled, preventing as much evaporation as possible.

And so the team dug trenches to guide and slow the water through winding paths in the garden. They planted trailing succulents to cover the ground and keep it cool, which allowed the soil to develop a healthy microbiome. Then they planted nitrogen fixing trees scattered throughout the landscape to provide nutrients to all their neighbors. Finally, the forest could support Date palms, papaya, olive and mulberry trees, and now vines of dragonfruit grow up around the trunks of the most established trees. Can you imagine walking through a forest dripping with ripe fruit like that? The whole ecosystem is designed to heal the landscape, to store water, and feed the community around it. In the middle of the desert, the people have transformed a wasteland into a space that sustains and nourishes life.

Toward the end of this verse Isaiah starts talking about the water cycle. Isaiah says that the rains come down from the heavens and they don't return until they've made the ground fertile, and provided seed for the sower and bread for food. And just like the rain, Isaiah says, my word goes out from my mouth and does not return empty but accomplishes my goals. Just like water sustains life, so does the word of God, and the word of God is hope.

I don't know how a team of gardeners can look at 10 acres of desert and believe that 20 years later it will feed a whole community. But I know that they wouldn't even pick up a shovel if they thought it was hopeless.

The land where this food forest sits is 40 miles east of Jerusalem. It's not inconceivable that the people may have passed through this place on their journey home from Babylon thousands of years ago. As they traveled to a home that most of them had never even seen, after a generation of enslavement, the people must have been more than a little scared. But I know they wouldn't have even picked up their feet to begin the journey if they thought it was hopeless.

The work of a forest farmer is to slow down water. To hold it in the ecosystem for as long as possible so that it can provide the most benefit to the land as possible so that it can make the land fertile and fruitful. If God's word is like water, how can we slow it so that it can nourish us?

We need to listen to the stories of the bible, the story of a people who survived the end of the world. We need to tell each other these stories and new ones, stories that give us hope for the future because hope is what sustains us through the hard work of transformation.

About ten years into the Greening the Desert project, the neighbors in the town surrounding this land started to take notice and want to get involved. Now it is managed not only by expert permaculture designers, but by the community. More and more, folks want to start their own food forests on their patch of desert land. They've seen a glimpse of what is possible, and they want to be a part of the transformation.

If this sounds intriguing to you, maybe you will be interested to know that there is a community run food forest only a few minutes from here in Mattapan, where neighbors have transformed a vacant lot into a forest of walnuts, apples, plums, berries, and

mushrooms. The Boston Food Forest Coalition has a goal to establish 30 of these food forests in the area in the next decade.

In order to work for a better world we must believe it is possible. We must believe that there can be a world where thornbushes are turned to cypress and myrtle, where there is bread without cost, where there is enough for everyone. Because God's promise is that exile is never the end of the story.

God's promise is that war is never the end of the story, COVID-19 is not the end of the story, the Maui fires are not the end of the story, climate collapse is not the end of the story, greed and exploitation and hate are never going to be the end of the story. Listen to the words of Isaiah: "You will go out joyfully, and be let out in peace; the mountains and hills before you will break into cries of joy, and all the trees in the countryside will clap their hands."

Our theme for worship together this summer is Cultivate. Believing that the goodness of God is declared throughout all of creation, we gathered together this summer to learn about the parable of the sower, about our gardens, about bugs, and about each other.

I believe that the most important thing that we cultivate in communities like this is hope. We are the hands and feet of God. As we tend to each other, to our community, to our earth, we are creating glimpses of a world where all who thirst are invited to the waters.