Sermon Texts: Isaiah 55:10-13

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, 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. 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. 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 sight that shall not be cut off.

Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"
"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Sermon:
In our Old Testament reading, the prophet, Isaiah, compares God’s word to rain and snow:
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, 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.

Then in our Gospel reading, Jesus compares God’s word to seed scattered by a farmer:
Some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

But there seems to be a conflict between the words of the Prophet Isaiah and Jesus’ Parable of the Seed. If God's Word accomplishes that which God purposes and succeeds in the thing for which God sent it, how can it get stolen away, scorched and withered, or choked by thorns? Does God's Word succeed or not?

As a preacher, I take a lot of comfort in the promise that God’s Word will accomplish that for which God has sent it! So, while my preaching skill may make the difference between someone taking a power nap during church or not, in the end, God’s word will do its job whether my sermon should earn me an A- or a D+. This one promise is probably what allows me to get up in the pulpit week after week and speak on God’s behalf! If it were all up to me, the pressure would be way too much for me!

On the other hand, as a pastor, I recognize that there are lots of rocks and weeds and birds and hardened soil in people’s lives, and on any given week, even if I were Billy Graham or the Pope, or dare I say, even Jesus himself, the message still wouldn’t get through to some people!

In the parable that Jesus tells, you and I are the soil, or rather, our hearts are the soil. Now in order to know what this means, we need to understand that in Jesus’ time, the heart was not the center of emotions—that happened lower down in your “splankna” or guts. Even today, we will
say, “I had butterflies in my stomach,” or “it felt like I got punched in the gut.” And when someone has a change of heart, it doesn’t mean that their emotions changed, but rather that they decided to do something different than they originally planned. In Jesus’ time, the heart was not the center of emotions, but the center of the will, or will power as we might say today. When you decided in your heart that you were going to do something, then you would do it, or keep trying as long as your heart was beating!

So when Jesus says that God’s word is sown in our hearts, it doesn’t necessarily mean that God wants to grow our emotions, but rather that the seed should grow into decisions and commitments that lead to actions, actions that are fueled by your will power.

So what would that look like for you? What kinds of decisions and commitments leading to action will happen in your life when the seed of God’s word is planted in your heart—the center of your will? Does God’s word produce a harvest in our hearts or not? If we return to my earlier question, “does God’s word succeed or not?” I think I would have to say, “Not every time, not in every heart.” Weeds and rocks and thorns are too often a reality in our lives.

Every parable breaks down at some point. I wonder how far we should take this parable. If our hearts are the soil, is there anything we can do to change the kind of soil we have? Or are we just stuck with it? “I’m rocky soil and that’s just how I’m going to stay, so I might as well not even try.”

Well, I’m not a farmer, but my grandfather was, and my mother is a gardener, and one thing that I have learned from them is that soil can be changed. Growing up in eastern South Dakota, where the topsoil was not nearly as deep or rich as in neighboring Iowa, a kid could often make some money in the spring by “picking rocks.” Although farmers never try to grow rocks, it seems that every year after plowing and disking or harrowing the soil to prepare for planting, the rocks would just show up as if they had been growing underground like potatoes! So us town kids would get hired by farmers to go out into the field with five-gallon buckets, walk alongside a flatbed trailer, and “pick” rocks!

The funny thing was that the next year, the same farmer would hire you to go to the same field and pick rocks again! As I said, the things seemed to grow like potatoes, so it never felt like you made much progress from year to year. But slowly, over time, I think the soil did get cleaner. The farmer would have less breakage of equipment, which was one of the main reasons for picking rocks, and the piles of stones left on some un-farmable corner of the field would grow and grow.

I also remember, after I went off to the big city to go to seminary, that sometimes after months in the city, I would drive back to my home town. And at some time during that six hour drive home, I would smell it, and I would think, “ahhhh, home!” Yes, it was the smell of manure freshly spread on the fields to enrich the soil. And I would see the tanks of more modern types of fertilizer as well.
Yes, there is hope for us. Soil can be changed. Rocks can be removed, weeds can be pulled, and sometimes even experiences that seem as unpleasant as the smell of manure can leave our soil surprisingly deeper and richer!

And we must also remember that sowing is not a one-time-only event. The Sower doesn’t sow seed only once and for all, but over and over again each planting season. I can’t tell you how many times I have spoken with parents worried about their children who no longer attend church, or who even claim to be atheists. As a father, I understand their concern. As a pastor though, I say trust in our God who “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love!”

The Bible is more than just one parable. Jesus is not just a sower who sows the seed willy-nilly, and if some seed falls on the path or the rocks or the weeds doesn’t seem to care. Jesus is also the Gardner in Luke 13, who begs the master not to cut down the tree, but to give it one more year, while he digs around it and puts manure on it! Jesus is the Shepherd who leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness and goes looking for the one who is lost, and when he finds it, carries it back on his shoulders! Whether we are sheep, or soil, or growing seeds, God loves us, God knows us, and God, like a farmer, is patient with us!

Season after season, the sower sows the seed. Season after season, the farmer tills the ground, picks the rocks, pulls the weeds and fertilizes the soil. There is a limit to how much we can do to prepare the soil of our hearts for God’s word. In the end, we are dependent on the Farmer.

But we are not just soil, or growing plants who produce a harvest. We also become the sowers—people who spread the word! We spread the word that God’s kingdom is here and now, in loving actions, in kind words, in patient forgiveness, in the decisions and commitments we make because of our faith. We can all sow the seed of God’s word, but God is the real farmer. God is the one with the heavy equipment and the deep knowledge of the soil.

In this way, both the soil and the sower are dependent on God. When God calls us to sow the seed of God’s word, God doesn’t expect us to be the soil experts, to decide what soil is ready for seed. God simply calls us to spread the word. Some seed will fall on the path, or on rocky ground or among weeds—let God worry about that—but some seed will fall on good soil and produce 30, 60, even 100 fold. Let anyone with ears listen.

Amen.