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Proper 20 • Isaiah 55:6–9 • September 21, 2014

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only now has the sin been confessed and absolved. Despite their wickedness, Yahweh worked for the good of his people and provided for their needs. Then in this text, God enables Joseph to forgive his brothers even as Joseph has been forgiven of his own sin.

The devil has a way of using sin to keep us in fear and guilt. The devil does not want us to receive the full and free forgiveness that Christ offers us. He works diligently to make us doubt that the forgiveness is real. He creates the same fear within us that Joseph’s brothers had. Satan wants us to believe that God is out to get us, to kill us, and to make us pay for what we have done. The devil wants us right where Joseph’s brothers are in our text: filled with fear, not knowing where to turn, and scrambling to find protection in ourselves.

Our gracious and loving God does not look upon us in our sin in such a way. Rather, he looks upon the filth of our sin, desires its punishment and our salvation, and so sends Christ. He sends the Christ to be left for dead in the wilderness, to suffer the pains and torments of death, even death on a cross for us, and to be buried in a pit. From the pit of death and despair, God raises the same Christ from the dead. Despite the evil of our sin, he overcomes sin and grants us full and free salvation. He removes our fears and replaces them with life.

Far beyond the provision of Joseph for his brothers and their families, Christ provides for not only every bodily need, but for the eternal needs of our salvation. He feeds us with the bread of life, fills us with his word, and invites us not to fear. For in him is life; our life!

Suggested Outline

I. The story of the text – From fear to forgiveness
   II. The story of us – From fear in sin to forgiveness in Christ
   III. Fear not – God has worked good out of evil

Paul Philp
own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all... He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors” (53:6, 12). God will restore his sin-
ful people to righteousness and glory!

Our pericope (55:6–9) is cut from the middle portion of chapter 55. It is preceded
by the gracious invitation to come, eat and drink without cost, incline your ear and listen,
and live (55:1–3). It is followed by the assurance that the heavenly Word from God’s mouth
is able to accomplish a universal renewal, which will bring joy to all the earth (55:10–12).
This all-creation theme in vv. 10–12 echoes the all-humanity theme in vv. 4–5: God will
make “David” a prince and commander for the peoples, and glorified Israel will be a
magnet for the nations. “A nation that did not know you shall run to you” (55:5).

Verses 6–7: The imperatives “seek,” “call upon,” and “return” are tied to the
imperatives “come,” “incline your ear,” and “live” in vv. 1–3. Together, they summon
sinners from all nations to hear God’s word and respond in faith. Yahweh is “near” and
“can be found” in his word: He speaks to sinners, inviting them to mercy and to life. The
call for the wicked man to “forsake his ways... and thoughts” suggests two dimensions
of repentance: sorrow over one’s sinfulness and the desire to walk in a better way—God’s
way. The call to “return” (בָּשָׂר) to Yahweh implies that men have departed from Yahweh
to their own path, a frequent theme in Isaiah (53:6; 57:17; 58:13; 65:2; 66:3–4).

Verses 8–9: These verses gives further reason (יְקָדֹשׁ) for the sinner to abandon his
ways and turn to Yahweh in repentant faith. Verse 8 states bluntly that God’s thoughts
and ways are not the thoughts and ways of sinful humanity. Read together with v. 8,
the comparison “as the heavens are higher than the earth” in v. 9 suggests not merely a
degree of difference but a complete difference in kind (“heavenly” vs. “earthly”). See also
Isaiah 31:3 and especially Hosea 11:8–9. Verse 10, just beyond this pericope, describes the
bridging of this chasm between heaven and earth by God’s descending-like-rain word.

The contrast between the thoughts and ways of God and man in these verses
raises a key question: in what respect are God’s thoughts and ways different and higher,
so that man should abandon his own ways and turn to God and his ways? A number
of answers can be given, all well fitted to the context of the passage and the book of
Isaiah, and a sermon could be framed around the following.

First, in their self-chosen “ways” (דרכים), men have forgotten “the way of
peace” and “the paths of justice” (59:8) which are taught in Yahweh’s Torah (2:3–4;
48:17–18). The “thoughts” (חפץ) of men are “thoughts of iniquity” (59:7–8) and
bring about the sword of Yahweh’s judgment, “for I know their works and their
thoughts” (66:16–18). Little has changed since the days of the Flood, when Yahweh
observed that “every intention of the thoughts (חפץ) of man’s heart was only evil
continually” (Gn 6:5). For many hearers, the painful fruits of their manner of thought
and chosen ways in life will be self-evident: The preacher might invite them to con-
sider where their own paths have led them. For others, their own way may still hold a
certain luster. “All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes,” Proverbs 16:2 warns,
“but the Lord weighs the spirit.”

Second, the repenting sinner will find that Yahweh’s “thoughts” and “ways” are
bent on mercy (חסדים) and abundant forgiveness (רחמים), in contrast to the ways of men.
This emphasis on Yahweh’s merciful pardon is the beating heart of this pericope. See also Psalm 103:11.

Third, Yahweh’s thoughts and ways—especially his mercy—are beyond the full comprehension of men. Some suffer longer under Yahweh’s chastening yoke. Others have an easier path. Yet mercy is the final word for his people . . . inexplicably so beyond the observation that “God is love” and that “Yahweh delights to show mercy.” Job certainly struggled with the inscrutability of Yahweh, yet acknowledged his goodness in the end. The gospel reading for this Sunday, the vineyard workers hired at different times yet all paid a full wage (Mt 20:1–16), captures God’s surprising and irrational mercy beautifully.

Ultimately, the thoughts and ways of God are no mere abstractions, whether goodness, justice, or mercy. Rather, they find incarnate expression in a person: Jesus, God’s beloved Son. He is the Λόγος and the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is the higher way and thought of God. In him the mercy of God for sinners finds its ultimate expression and rationale. It is by the nail-marked hands of Jesus, ultimately, that the vineyard workers are beckoned to the vineyard and recompensed beyond their merits. In the life, death, resurrection, present forgiveness, and coming kingdom of Jesus we see just how wondrous are the thoughts and ways of our God, and just how far beyond our own thoughts and imagining (Is 64:4; 65:17; 1 Cor 2:9)! So let us sinners forsake our own ways and thoughts, and return to our God and his ways. For he will have mercy on us and forgive us abundantly. And his thoughts and ways—expressed in his word and especially in his Son—are just plain better than ours!

Proper 21 • Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32 • September 28, 2014

The Just Way of God

“The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” This phrase leads Yahweh through Ezekiel to address Israel’s whining as they blame Yahweh for their woe and suffering in the destruction of the land and in the exile under Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. The preacher is encouraged to give attention to the rhetorical structure of the pericope that reconstructs a conversation between Yahweh and Israel through Ezekiel, although decidedly from God’s perspective. The rhetorical structure provides a potential pattern for preaching the text.

In 597, King Jehoiachin, the nobility of Judea, and much of the populace are taken into exile and resettled in southeastern Mesopotamia. Significant destruction of Jerusalem and the land of Judea occurs at the hands of the Babylonians. And the people in exile with Ezekiel are repeating the popular proverb: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” They complain that they are suffering judgment (their teeth set on edge) because of the sour grapes (the sin) that