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

Thomas Egger

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, eggert@csl.edu

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Better ways, better thoughts. The ways and thoughts of God are immeasurably better than the ways and thoughts of sinful people. God therefore calls all humanity to true repentance, that is, to abandon their own wicked thoughts and ways and to return to God in faith—for God’s ways include incomprehensible mercy toward sinners!

The iniquitous ways of Judah and Jerusalem have become a festering wound, and God’s devastating judgment is falling upon them (Is 1:4–7): the assaults of Assyria and eventually the exile imposed by Babylon. Yet under the dominant theme of comfort (40:1), Isaiah also proclaims hope through the obedient work of Yahweh’s Servant in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 53. This final Servant Song, in particular, serves as background for our pericope: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his

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 sinful 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” (שׁוּב) 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 (כִּי) 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” (דַּרְכֵימֶיךָ), 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” (מַחְשְׁבוֹתַי) 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 (מַחְשְׁבוֹתַי) 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 consider 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 (רַחֵם) and abundant forgiveness (סַלַּח), 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 Λογος 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!