

3-1-1951

Homiletics: Sermon Study on Isaiah 55:6-11

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Recommended Citation

Gienapp, J. Henry (1951) "Homiletics: Sermon Study on Isaiah 55:6-11," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 22, Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol22/iss1/17>

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HOMILETICS

SERVICE THEMES AND TEXTS FOR APRIL

April 1	Quassim.	Gen. 32:21-30	Hold Fast to Life in Christ
April 8	Mis. D.	Psalm 23	Christ the Good Shepherd
April 15	Jub.	Is. 40:26-31	Certainty and Power in the Merciful God
April 22	Cant.	Psalm 98	The Christian's Triumphant Praise
April 29	Rog.	Is. 55:6-11	The Seeking Heart of the Saved Man

Sermon Study on Isaiah 55:6-11 for Rogate

THE TEXT IN GENERAL

Is. 55:6-11, the Eisenach Old Testament text selected for Rogate Sunday, might well be described as "apples of gold in pictures of silver" (Prov. 25:11). The "pictures of silver," or silver containers, "skillfully wrought in openwork pattern," are vv. 6 and 7, the context which serves as a setting for the other verses; and the "apples of gold" are the more frequently cited and hence rather familiar prooftexts: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (vv. 8-9) and: "As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater: so shall My Word be that goeth forth out of My mouth; it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (vv. 10-11). While beautiful in themselves, these "apples of gold," as we shall see, acquire added luster from the "pictures of silver," from the context in which they lie embedded.

The reason why the Eisenach Conference designated Is. 55:6-11 as the text for Rogate Sunday is to be found, it seems, in the opening verse. Here occur the exhortations to seek the Lord and to

call upon Him. These are quite generally understood as referring to prayer as can be seen from the fact that v. 6 is found listed in topical indexes frequently under the heading of prayer. In a number of Scripture passages these same exhortations do refer to prayer (cf. Matt. 7:7; Ps. 50:15). Besides, the imagery of these exhortations is that of approaching God and requesting favors from Him. In view of all this v. 6 has commonly been regarded as a passage which treats of prayer, and, following the same notion, the Eisenach Conference saw in this passage from Isaiah a text suitable for Rogate Sunday.

A closer study of this text, however, reveals that this passage really does not speak of prayer; at least not of prayer in the sense of making one's requests known unto God. Only if one looks upon the new life in God, the life lived by the Spirit, who manifests His presence in the believer's heart by crying "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15), as prayer, can one consider Is. 55:6-11 a suitable text for Rogate Sunday, and if one keeps this concept in mind, then the text can be used to treat the subject of prayer. Lenski also holds that this text, although selected to present the theme of Prayer Sunday, does not speak of prayer. He has this to say about the passage: "While the three stanzas of which our text is composed are a call to repentance for sinful Israel, this call has the form of *an admonition to prayer*" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Old Testament Eisenach Selections*, p. 555). Also commenting on this section, August Pieper omits all reference to prayer, titling it simply a "Bussruf an die Suender in Israel" (Pieper, *Jesajas II*, p. 452).

To understand this Isaiah text properly, we shall do well to remind ourselves of the Prophet's mission. His was the task of proclaiming to the chosen race that the Holy One in Israel had grown weary of nursing a wayward and incurable nation and had decreed to reject it for good, preserving for Himself at the same time, however, a remnant out of which to build a new and more glorious kingdom.

The chapter of which the passage under study is a part belongs to those sections of Isaiah's prophecy designed particularly to preserve unto the Lord a remnant in Israel, and as such it can be placed alongside Ch. 53, both being rich in Gospel comfort. Ch. 53 places,

as it were, the rich treasures of grace on display; Ch. 55 invites men to help themselves to these treasures and shows them how to go about this. Barnes says of Ch. 55: "There is not to be found in the Bible a chapter more replete with rich invitation than this; nor perhaps is there anywhere to be found one of more exquisite beauty. To the end of the world it will stand as the fullest conceivable demonstration that God *intended* that the offers of salvation should be made to all men; and that He designs that His Gospel shall be successful on the earth, and shall accomplish the great plans which He had in view when He devised the scheme of redemption. While this precious chapter remains in the Book of God, no sinner need to despair of salvation who is disposed to turn to Him; no one can plead that he is too poor or too great a sinner to be saved; no one can maintain successfully that the provisions of mercy are limited in their nature or their applicability to any portion of the race; and no minister of the Gospel need be desponding about the success of the work in which he is engaged." (Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament*, Vol. II, p. 173.)

As was indicated above, the first section of Ch. 55 is an invitation extended to all men to help themselves to the rich treasures of God's grace. In the imagery of a typical Oriental market, or bazaar, where choicest foods have been put on sale, this section calls men to come and buy water, wine, milk, and bread — objects which visualize God's grace — to come and buy with this difference that prospective buyers can acquire these life-sustaining foods "without money and without price" (Is. 55:1).

The second section of Ch. 55, which is the text under study, shows men in a general way how to respond to God's gracious invitation, at the same time making the method attractive "by the addition of promises of mercy and forgiveness, by an explanation of the Lord's ways and thoughts, and by the assurance that the Lord's Word will do its work" (Lenski, *op. cit.*, p. 555).

This section, like the entire chapter, is addressed to unrepentant Israel (Ch. 55:12), to a people whose deportation to Babylon had already been announced (Ch. 39:6). However, the comfort offered in this text is intended not only for Israel, but also for the heathen (Ch. 55:5), in fact, for everyone "that thirsteth" (Ch. 55:1).

THE TEXT IN DETAIL

The Prophet Isaiah, as will be remembered, had been called most impressively to be the commissioner of the Lord of Hosts to rebellious Israel, and just as solemnly he had vowed to discharge his sacred mission to this people of unclean lips, as he designated his fellow men (Ch. 6). Officiating now as the spokesman of the Holy One in Israel, he urges: "*Seek ye the Lord.*" This is simply a call to repentance.

Unconverted and unregenerated men do not seek the Lord. They forsake Him. Like our first parents, they flee from Him and seek to hide from His presence. When the Lord looks down from heaven upon them to see if there be any that understand and really seek Him, He finds that they do not seek Him, but have "all gone aside, they are all together become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Ps. 14:2-3). In a sense they do seek; they seek after strange gods (Jer. 8:2) or after those who claim to possess supernatural powers (1 Sam. 28:7), but not the Lord. Such seeking, however, does not have the promise of life as does seeking the Lord (Amos 5:4).

In Isaiah's day, Israel was a nation of unregenerated and unconverted men, a rebellious people (Is. 1:2,4). Hence the Prophet calls to them, as well as to all like-minded men, to stop forsaking the Lord and fleeing from His presence and, instead, to turn to Him in repentance and faith and draw near unto Him and seek Him with all their heart. In no sense is this to be a physical seeking of the Lord. Men are to seek Him by adopting an attitude of heart that is right and God-pleasing, by presenting themselves before the Lord with a "contrite and humble spirit" (Is. 57:15), by seeking with heart and soul as Moses urges in Deut. 4:29: "If from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find Him, if thou seek Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul." They are to "seek to obtain the true knowledge of Him; seek reconciliation with Him; seek His pardoning mercy" (Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 177).

This seeking the Lord is to be done "*while He may be found.*" One implication of these words is that God can be found now. God, of course, is everywhere (Jer. 23:24). But as a God of grace He can be found only there wherever He chooses to reveal Himself,

wherever He has recorded His name (Ex. 20:24), wherever He speaks to men, either directly or through His prophets (John 5:39; Luke 10:16). So if men would find God and receive His grace and forgiveness, they must turn to His revelation of Himself, to His Word as spoken by His Prophets. This must be done now, during this present time of grace; for, as is also implied in the words "while He may be found," the time will come when it is impossible to obtain God's favor. God can and does withdraw His gracious presence from men. He withdrew it from Saul so that Saul could no longer find Him (1 Sam. 28:7, 15). He withdrew it from Jerusalem (Luke 19:42). At times He creates a famine of the Word (Amos 8:12). When these things come to pass, then, though men seek the Lord, they cannot find Him; the day of grace has passed by.

Parallel in thought to the first half of v. 6 is the second half: "*Call ye upon Him.*" This exhortation, too, calls for a complete change of heart, a turning about which spells salvation (Rom. 10:13). Instead of trusting in their own righteousness, men are to implore God for mercy, whereby alone they will be saved. And this, too, must be done "*while He is near.*" In a sense God is always near; in fact, "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). But with His grace He is not always near. There comes a time when He withdraws from men with His gracious call (Is. 65:12; 66:4), when He forsakes them and leaves them to their destiny, when He closes the door to the bridal chamber (Matt. 25:10). Then He is no longer near, and all calling upon Him is in vain.

Luther has this to say in connection with v. 6: "Du darfst nicht denken, dass du ihn finden wirst, wenn er nun hinweg ist, ob du auch die Welt auslieferst; sondern weil er noch da ist, so magst du ihn suchen und finden; wie Jesaias Kap. 55, 6 spricht: 'Suchet . . . ist' usw. Wirst du es versehen und ihn vorueber lassen, so wird alles Suchen verloren sein. Das habe ich selbst versucht and erfahren laenger denn zwanzig Jahre in meiner Moencherei, da ich ihn gesucht habe mit grosser Muehe und Abbrechen meines Leibes." (St. Louis ed., XII:929.)

Although Isaiah exhorts his fellow men to seek the Lord and to call upon Him, this does not mean that they have of themselves

the power to do this. It is God Himself who makes them willing and eager to seek Him and to call upon Him (Jer. 31:18), and He engenders this willingness and eagerness through the exhortations themselves (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18).

That the exhortations of v. 6 are not strictly a summons to prayer, but rather a call to repentance and faith, becomes very clear in v. 7. Here Isaiah says: "*Let the wicked forsake his way.*" The wicked man is the godless man who has separated himself from the Lord and follows his own lusts and passions. Obeying them constitutes "his way," a way that is infinitely inferior and diametrically opposed to God's and that will ultimately lead to perdition (Ps. 1:6). This way the wicked should forsake; from it he should turn aside, and, instead, he should set his foot upon the Lord's way, let himself be guided in all his doings by the Lord's will. Similarly, "*the unrighteous man*" should forsake "*his thoughts.*" Literally, the unrighteous man is the man of iniquity, the man that has become so steeped in iniquitous and evil deeds that nothing fazes him any more, the man that is completely taken up with inventing misdeeds and plotting crimes against man and God. This man God wants transformed, wants him to forsake his wicked machinations and substitute for them divine thoughts, thoughts that are vastly higher than any conceived by sinful man. In short, God wants him to "*return to Jehovah,*" to travel on His own way and to let himself be guided by His thoughts.

With this reference to the wicked and the unrighteous man, Isaiah does not mean to imply that among God's people there exists merely a sprinkling of such men. His thought is rather this, that Israel is a nation made up entirely of wicked and unrighteous men.

In the name of the Lord, Isaiah attaches a glorious promise to the forsaking of one's way and of one's thoughts described in v. 7a. Every one who turns to Jehovah will find that "*He will have mercy upon him,*" that He will love the penitent sinner most tenderly, regardless of how great and how manifold his sins may have been. Similarly, every one who turns "*to our God,*" that is, to the Lord God, who has entered into a peculiar covenant relationship not only with the Prophet, but also with Israel, will discover that "*He*

will abundantly pardon." The expression used here, *jarbeh lisloach*, literally reads: "He will make many the pardoning." These two statements of Jehovah's activity toward every penitent sinner are most appealing and comforting. The former assures every single sinner of Jehovah's personal compassion; the latter speaks of the unlimited character of God's grace and forgiveness (cf. Is. 1:18; Rom. 5:20). (Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 454.) Lenski puts it this way: "There is richness of thought in the last two lines: 'upon him' makes the matter personal for each sinner that turns to the Lord; an abundant pardon covers all the sins and guilt of each sinner" (Lenski, *op. cit.*, p. 559).

Perhaps it will not be considered superfluous to remind ourselves that the forsaking of one's way and of one's thoughts and the turning to Jehovah of v. 7 must not be understood as a meritorious act which induces God to show mercy and grant pardon. God's heart is constantly filled with mercy and thoughts of pardon toward every sinner, whether the sinner turn to Him or not (Is. 1:18). However, by turning to Jehovah, that is, by believing in Him, the sinner simply lays hold of, and appropriates unto himself, the grace and pardon residing in the heart of Israel's Covenant God.

So far we have considered the Lord's call to repentance and faith proper. We now come to a section which aims to "support that call and help make it most effective" (*ibid.*, p. 559). In this section, it is to be remembered, the Prophet gives us the words of the Lord directly.

His words in part are these: "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.*" (Vv. 8 and 9.) The thought of these verses is in no way difficult. God compares His ways and thoughts with those of the people to whom He is speaking, and in doing so He indicates that His ways and thoughts have nothing in common with the ways and thoughts of rebellious Israel, that they are opposed to each other, and that there is a heaven-wide difference between the two. There is, however, this question: In what respect are the ways and thoughts of God entirely different from, and far superior to, the ways and the thoughts of the people spoken to? In general, one may say that this text

has been given limited application. It has been applied largely to God's unsearchable judgments in the government of the world, to His ways past finding out in His Kingdom of Power.

The context demands a different application. Note that the ways and the thoughts of God are placed in contrast to the ways of the wicked man and the thoughts of the unrighteous man. Note also that the reference is to ways and thoughts, not just of God, *'elohim*, but of the Lord, Jehovah, the Covenant God, who stands in a peculiar relationship to the chosen people. From this it would seem that God's ways are everything that He has undertaken, and still is undertaking, to save His people, and His thoughts are everything that He has conceived, and is still conceiving, to bestow mercy upon men, to pardon their sins, and thus to enable them to attain eternal salvation. On the other hand, the ways of the people to whom the Lord is speaking, of rebellious and wayward Israel, of all wicked and unrighteous men, are everything that they have done, and are still doing, in opposition to the Lord, everything whereby they are heaping destruction upon themselves (Hos. 13:9), and their thoughts are the schemes and devices of their evil hearts — their ingratitude (Is. 1:3), their vain oblations (Is. 1:11), their deeds of blood (Is. 59:3), their lies and deceit (Is. 59:3) — all of which are abhorrent to the Lord and call down destruction.

Luther equates "thoughts" when applied to wicked and unrighteous men with the "counsel of the ungodly" of Ps. 1:1 and writes: "Wir verstehen darunter, wie dort und sonst auch schon genugsam gesagt ist, den gottlosen Wahn, Sinn, Gemueth, das, was die Vernunft eingibt (*dictamina*) ueber Gott und goettliche Werke und Worte, was von Menschen erfunden worden ist und durch Lehren anderen mitgeteilt" (St. Louis ed., IV:439).

Because God's thoughts and ways have as their aim man's salvation, while man's thoughts and ways are directed toward his ruin, the former are higher, and "not only to a degree, but infinitely: as the heavens are higher than the earth, a distance no man has ever measured."

In commenting on this passage, Daechsel writes: "The thoughts of God are not our thoughts in regard to their contents, in regard to their aims, in regard to their effect. Ours are directed to sin, His to salvation; ours are impotent, His are carried into effect by means

of His creative Word. So also our ways are not His ways. Ours are directed toward pleasure, His toward real blessedness; ours are uncertain and miss the goal, His are firm and fixed and attain the goal. Think, for instance, of the fortunes of men, of their plans, of their self-invented attempts at justifying and saving themselves—ever there appears a heaven-wide gulf between God's ways and ours." (Quoted by Lenski.)

God's reason for pointing out this heaven-wide difference is to make men all the more eager to forsake their evil ways and to abandon their ruinous thoughts and to choose to walk in God's ways and to accept His salutary thoughts.

As proof that His ways and thoughts are higher than those of men the Lord brings a specific example in vv. 8 and 9. Over against a people who hold God's Word in contempt (Is. 53:1) the Lord points out its efficacy. He does so by drawing a comparison between the Word and a natural phenomenon. "*For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven,*" He says, "*and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater.*"

In Palestine, rain and, at colder temperatures, snow coming down out of the sky was always a welcome sight. Whether rain or snow, it descends with a God-given purpose. It "returneth not thither." Of course, the rain and melted snow eventually evaporate or seep through the soil into rivers and lakes, whence they evaporate and so in a sense return to heaven. But they do not do so without first carrying out the purpose for which they were sent, which is stated as threefold: They 1) water the earth, and 2) make it bring forth, and 3) bud; the effect of the snow being, if one wishes to point out a difference, not as immediate as that of the rain.

One might ask: Do the rain and snow which fall on rocks and bodies of water accomplish the purpose for which they have been sent? Strictly speaking, not. But God is speaking not of every raindrop or snowflake, but of rain and snow in general, and these certainly accomplish their purpose. Generally speaking, the rain and snow water the earth and make the seed planted therein sprout and finally develop ears heavy with kernels, which serve the farmer as seed for the next harvest and provide bread for the eater. This

general effect of the rain and snow is the point of comparison, all else being detail to make the illustration clear and attractive.

Now just as in the realm of nature rain and snow go forth and produce seed and bread, so God's Word operates in the realm of the Spirit. "*So shall My Word be,*" He says, "*that goeth forth out of My mouth.*" God here speaks of His Word. This is not anything vague; it is whatever He has spoken. It can come to man directly (1 Sam. 3:10, 21) or through God's Prophets (Is. 40:1; Is. 55:8) or in written form (1 Peter 4:11). For us the Scriptures are God's Word. Here God has recorded His Word for us through His inspired Prophets, Evangelists, and Apostles. Yet even though His Word has been written down and become fixed for us, it is still His Word. Whenever this Word is proclaimed, it "goeth forth" out of His mouth, filled with power.

As God's Word goes forth, it does so with a purpose. God sends it forth as an ambassador (Ps. 147:15) to perform a specific task, to "*accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.*" Because God sends it forth and consequently endows it with everything that it needs to achieve its projected result, endows it with the necessary power to fulfill its mission, He can affirm that "*it shall not return unto Me void,*" empty-handed, without having accomplished its purpose. Rather it will effect what the Lord desires to have done; it will carry to a satisfying finish what God intended when He sent it forth. The efficacy of God's Word, so clearly taught in other Scripture texts (cf. Jer. 23:29; Rom. 1:16), is forcefully set forth in this text.

One cannot fail to be impressed with the absoluteness with which the Lord speaks here of the power and efficacy of His Word. Whether men hear that Word proclaimed by His Prophet or read it from the printed page, they have it on God's authority that it will accomplish its God-given purpose.

A question still in need of an answer is this one: What is God's purpose in sending forth His Word? What does He want it to accomplish? In what thing does He desire it to prosper? God's Word, as is evident from the entire chapter and especially v. 12, is sent forth to induce wicked and rebellious men, such as the Israelites were, to seek the Lord and to call upon Him (v. 6) and to

forsake their evil ways and sinful thoughts and turn to Jehovah (v.7), in short, to repent and live (Amos 5:4).

Here a problem suggests itself: If God sends forth His Word to convert the sinner and if that Word shall, as He affirms, accomplish its purpose, why is it that many who hear that Word remain unconverted as certainly happened in Isaiah's day (Is. 53:1)?

Some commentators answer the question this way: God's purpose in giving His Word is twofold: He lets it be preached, on the one hand, to work repentance and faith, and, on the other, to serve as a witness against all unbelievers, so that they will be without excuse on the day of reckoning.

God's Word, it is true, is preached at times as a witness against men (Is. 6:9). But that is not the real purpose for which God gives His Word. His real purpose is to convert the sinner. God would have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), and to that end He sends forth His Word, and this, He assures us, will accomplish this end. Nothing is said in this text about the other side of the problem — man's ability to frustrate the power of the Word as far as he is concerned. The Prophet merely emphasizes the positive — God's Word will accomplish the conversion of godless men.

One ought to keep in mind that the saving power of God's Word, set forth so clearly in this text, is a mystery, as is also the parallel truth, man's ability to frustrate that power, which is not touched upon in this text. Every attempt to bring the second into some kind of relationship with the first in this connection results in a rationalization which all too often goes beyond Scripture. So much is very clearly asserted in vv. 10 and 11: God's Word accomplishes the purpose for which it has been sent; and God uses this truth to persuade the sinner to heed His call to repentance. Herein lies a world of comfort for every believer who builds his faith upon the Word of God, as well as for every preacher of the Word who proclaims God's message to sinful men.

THE TEXT HOMILETICALLY

Since Is. 55:6-11 does not treat of prayer, but rather of repentance and faith, one ought not to use this text if one wishes to treat the subject of prayer. However, one should be able to

include in a treatment of the real theme of this section a paragraph on prayer. In whatever way this text is handled, it should be used, above all, to open the eyes of sinners to a fresh view of Christ's sweet Gospel.

The following outlines may be helpful if one intends to treat the entire section in one sermon.

Theme: Seek the Lord

1. In the day of grace (v.6)
2. Because of your own lack (vv.7,8,9)
3. In the Lord's saving Word (vv.10,11)

Theme: God's Thoughts Are Higher Than Our Thoughts

1. His thoughts about the time of grace (v.6)
2. His thoughts about mercy and pardon (v.7)
3. His thoughts about the saving Word (vv.10,11)

Theme: The Believing Heart Is a Seeking Heart

It seeks God

1. in the day of grace (v.6)
2. for His thoughts (vv.7,8,9)
3. in His saving Word (vv.10,11)

Theme: Words by Which to Live a God-Seeking Life

1. The Lord can be found now (v.6)
2. The Lord pardons abundantly (v.7)
3. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (vv.8,9)
4. His Word has power to save (vv.10,11)

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