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Focal Scripture: Romans 8, Matthew 13, Isaiah 55

Good morning again, beloved siblings, gathered here at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church,

Things are really getting crazy these days – on both sides of the Atlantic, everyone is complaining about how things are going from bad to worse. Alright, this *is* very common among all human cultures: each generation says that things were better once, in particular when they themselves were young, and they had the say. But it is a bit confusing though, because I, at least, remember people telling me when I was young that things had been better in *their* youth! There is an obvious inclination to glorify the past. Good for those who can think about a better time, bad for those younger than us who might feel annoyed by all of this talk about the “good old times,” which usually does not hold water when we compare facts then to facts now. There truly are some reasons at least to say that some things have actually improved, if we look at the big picture.

But this all is my way of proving that I know that talking about the past being better is annoying. But, now, my apologies to all the younger members here at Christ the Good Shepherd, because, get ready, now my talking about the past being better begins! But I am only seconding what so many people are already saying: things have gotten worse both through and after the pandemic. After standing together against the threat of the virus, people seem to be so disrupted, divided, and quick to anger.

And nothing seems to work like it used to! As some of you know, I was traveling through Europe over the last few weeks, and if I wanted to, I could tell you some terrible stories about delayed trains and canceled flights, so many, in fact, that this sermon would be way too long! And don't get me started on those calls with officials and customer service when things do inevitably go wrong. It is not just nostalgia about my youth when I say this went much smoother in earlier times, it sometimes even refers to a time only a few years ago. “Your flight has been disrupted,” an airline wrote to me a few weeks ago, pushing my return flight back by two

days, and just a few hours before I was going to start! So true: The flight truly was “disrupted,” as so much seems to be. Nothing seems to work normally, there is almost no word you can trust in, even if you do get a real word from a real human being. Just think about being on hold, with an artificial voice telling you: “Please wait,” or, “If you want this, dial 1, if you want that, dial 2.” I simply want to have a real person on the phone! There are so many voices, talking and talking, but they all lack reliability. How could what a machine is telling you be reliable? Wouldn't it just be great to have a word mean what it is supposed to mean—a message that delivers what it promises, that creates what it says?

A word that “shall accomplish that which I purpose / and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” This is what God says about *his* word, according to Isaiah. This sounds much better indeed than all the unreliable words of machines or humans. A true and reliable word sounds so different compared to our experience in our time. In the end, even our era might not be so special as I just made it out to be. Maybe we only experience what is common among all humans: we

say something, but we can't follow through, we do not succeed. And there are many reasons for us to ~~not succeed~~ fail: the circumstances were off for this reason or that, we faced adversaries or enemies even, maybe we weren't adamant enough, or we lost power in the daily struggle of life.

We do lose power so often, and here God's promise comes in. God will not lose power. He will not lose power, even if there are enemies in our way. He will not lose power, even if we do. He will not lose power, even if circumstances are bad. God is steadfast.

Isaiah refers to rain and snow as examples of God's everlasting love. This is not only a message of hope. There was not much snow last winter here, was there? And rain again gives us reason in our day to worry about the past being better than the present. The floods in Texas or California remind us about the changing climate. Isaiah is right, that rain does not return, but this is not only a message of hope. Rain not only makes the earth “bring forth and sprout, giving seed

to the sower and bread to the eater,” but it can also be violent, destroying nature, and taking livelihoods and even lives.

And like rain and snow, God’s voice can be violent and threatening too. It is not only good news when Jesus says that many people will not grasp the word, like seeds cast upon rocks or sown among thorns. There bad fortune comes from the evil, and their outcome will be evil. Saying this, Jesus obviously intends for us to reflect upon ourselves, to face the ways we stray from his word. He urges us to think about ourselves, how we are like the rock or the thorns. How often do we simply forgot about God’s word? If the word “You shall nor murder” really means “that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need,” as Martin Luther taught us in his Small Catechism, it is easy to say, that we never have forgotten about this. Alright, we might not have harmed our neighbor bodily, but we *do not* always and in all places support them in every physical need.

As many of you know, I went through some health issues with my eyes in recent weeks. You prayed for me, and I am

deeply grateful for the love and support I felt from you, thank you so much. Now, being recovered, I can reflect on what happened there, and what the experience meant to live in our society with visual restrictions. Walking through crowded streets, being overtaken from behind, from the left side and the right, is appalling when you don’t see the others coming in time. Not being able to see, I was lost trying to find my way ~~then~~ in a world that gives directions only with visual signs, not by audible means. This was, luckily, a brief experience of being excluded from our world, but it was a profound one for me: the exclusion of people in need is everywhere. Using the New York Subway at most stations is a challenge for those who are not able to take stairways. Participating in social life is not easy for those who cannot hear. There is a lack of help and support everywhere, and everyone of us partakes in neglecting the other, quickly and easily - thinking that living without disability is "normal", while living with them is not. No doubt, we are rocky soil, as Jesus says, forgetting the word quickly. We don’t even need persecution to bring our faith off the rails, but just our looking

for comfort and convenience is enough, and navigating our daily trials and sorrows, which are the thorns that Jesus is speaking of. Both apply to us, the rocky soil as well as the thorns.

That might make us wonder, if Jesus really talks about three groups of people here, then we could look around and say: “Look there: Doesn’t this man look like someone who always forgets about the word of God?” guessing if he might be the rocky one rather or the thorny one. But remember: Jesus’ message is not meant to categorize others, it is meant to make us reflect upon ourselves.

This also means: We are not only on the rocky one, we are not only choked with the thorn. We are good soil, too! Maybe only every now and then, but we are, and Jesus gives the chance to us: We can bear fruit, “in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty,” he says. We might even come down to giving fruit only once, but that means giving fruit anyhow. One fruit is still a fruit! One good moment in your life is a good moment. As after a rain, flowers might not sprout up everywhere in your yard. There

might be only one flower, at a shaded, well protected place. Wouldn’t you love this flower? Just as the sower, just as Jesus, would love this fruit and harvest it when the time comes.

What *could* be a threatening word of God about us being inclined to evil or deceived by evil, becomes instead a consoling word here, and a word of encouragement.

God’s word spreads out like the rain to produce fruit. And as Isaiah prophecies, it does not return, that means: It remains with us to make us bear fruit, we only have to make it real.

Paul today is telling us how we can do this: we let God’s Spirit live in us. There is a long story in Christianity of denigrating our bodies, hating them even. Not only ascetics in the desert or monks and nuns in the monasteries did it. And even after abolishing monasteries, Lutherans did, too, controlling their bodily life all day, despising their desires, piling on more guilt about joy than encouragement to really enjoy this world. Paul seems to support this bodily denial, when he speaks about our bodies connecting us with sin. He might be right to some degree in doing so. Our bodies bring

much harm to others, as we forget them when thinking about our own needs or lusts. It's true, our bodies might sometimes make us the rocky ground that forgets God's word sometimes. But, honestly, our souls do too. Soul is not better in this respect than bodies are. It is my inner desire that makes me want to be greater than others, wealthier, and more important. The body only follows.

So, when Paul speaks about the body, it is not only about blood and flesh and bones. They have no will on their own. It is about this human being that does not want more than just itself. Our body wants so unwittingly, when reminding us that it is hungry and needs supply from outside to survive. Our souls might show its will more subtly, but in the end, it says the same: I want to be here, and I want to be strong. It is all about me. It accompanies the body, and body follows the soul, which means: only blaming the body would fall short in respect of Paul's demand.

Having Christ dwelling in us, this changes soul *and* body, giving them another direction. With Christ in us, feeling the spirit of God in our inner self, we then do not think about our

needs or our desires, but we get a view of the world that is broadened, taking all others in. It is not about me anymore, but about taking care of my neighbor, just like Luther was talking about in his Small Catechism. Christ leads us to take their health and needs into account, and to direct our thinking and acting to support them.

If everyone had Christ in themselves this way, we would live in a wonderful world. But, clearly, our world is different. Obviously, we are different. There is no one hovering around, thinking of nothing else than Christ and their neighbor. Someone like that would be more saintly than anyone that has ever been born! We all know this is simply impossible.

Paul doesn't mean something impossible, he just means this "hundredfold, sixty, thirty" or maybe 15 or only one. He wants us to see that Christ is dwelling in us at least every now and then. We might need to work on this. When we feel like rocky soil and we're starting to slip, we can remind ourselves that the joy of God's word is always with us. We might try to open our eyes, the outer ones as well as the inner ones, to the needs of the other. Maybe we might consider interrupting the

“direct flights” of our lives, and instead “redirect.” Redirect some of our wealth and privilege to others. Maybe we could consider building in a “delay” to think about others, or a longer “lay-over” to stop and see those those who are on the margins of society—or just a pause to look for those who are sick. And, as Luther says, “help and support them in every physical need.” This might not happen all the time, and we might not always be successful in our attempts. But remember God’s promise, that his word “shall accomplish that which he purposes / and succeed in the thing for which he sent it.”

What a great promise – and what a great chance for us to be part of this marvelous story of success. Whenever we give room for the other in our soul instead of ourselves, and whenever our body follows and helps the other, there is a kind of fruit, coming from the seeds which the sower has spread. This might be a hundredfold, or sixty or thirty times. This is great. But it is great even if it happens just once. God does not count our deeds but looks at our hearts, and hopes to see Christ living there, directing our lives. God doesn’t

care if we forget every so often – if only we return to him and to his word. God’s word is here. God has sent it and will never return or be taken away. We only have to listen, deeply, from our hearts. God will help us to let it take root and bear good fruits. In this we trust.

Amen