

*“The Word Will Not Fail”*

Fred “Craddock tells a story about the time he got a phone call from a woman whose father had died. She had been a teenager in one of the churches he had served as pastor twenty years before, and he would have sworn that if there was ever a person who never heard a word he said, that teenage girl was it. She was always giggling with her friends in the balcony, passing notes to boys, drawing pictures on the bulletin. But when her father died, she looked up her old pastor and gave him a call. ‘I don’t know if you remember me,’ she started. Oh, yes, he remembered! ‘When my daddy died, I thought I was going to come apart,’ she continued. ‘I cried and cried and cried. I didn’t know what to do. But then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons . . .’ Craddock was stunned. She had remembered something he had said in one of his sermons?!” (This story is reported on numerous web sites but with attribution.)

It is amazing what someone will recall from a conversation or even from a sermon! Someone, who seems to not be paying any attention at all, was moved, for some reason, to remember a word or words many years later! **Today’s Scripture from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah calls the hearer or reader to not only remember a word or words but to put one’s trust in the fulfillment of the message communicated by those specific words.** Unfortunately, statements about God’s Word by prophets in the Scriptures, have often been misunderstood to be references to the Bible in general. Instead, the individual declarations of the prophets are themselves intended to be perceived as **God’s Word**. Furthermore, as the most recent class of Round Grove’s Confirmands included in their personal Statements of Belief, the Bible is not one book but a collection – a library of 66 books. Many of them were not even written until sometime following the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So, when God speaks through a prophet, references to God’s Word are not about books, which would not even be written until 600 years later. **Therefore, the announcement of God’s Word by a prophet of the Almighty is intended to be the focus when God’s Word is lifted up in a prophetic statement.**

When the Reading states, *“My Word is like the snow and the rain that come down from the sky to water the earth. They make the crops grow and provide seed for planting and food to eat”*, God spoke through the prophet and wanted the audience of this declaration to understand the *“My Word”* is the complete message being communicated by the Almighty on that occasion. With regards to today’s Scripture, *“My Word”* means the prophet’s statement in chapter 55 of the Book of Isaiah. It might be expanded to mean all of the prophet’s declarations in chapters 40 through 55, and so, today’s Reading would be the conclusion of this specific **Word of God**.

Now, if I just listened to a speaker making such a comment, I would probably wonder and most likely ask, “Why not consider this specific Word of God to be the whole reported communication of the Almighty through the prophet Isaiah – essentially all of the prophesy in the Book of Isaiah?” The simple answer to my hypothetical question is the Book of Isaiah was not actually God’s Word from one prophet but, most likely, from three. **The prophet Isaiah, whose prophecies are reported in chapters 1-39 was no longer alive by the time another prophet communicated God’s Word reported in chapters 40-55.** Additionally, it was most likely the case, it was even a different prophet, who declared God’s Word in chapters 56-63.

Chapters 40-55 of the Book of Isaiah come from a time after **587 B.C.**, when the capital of Judah, Jerusalem, and the Temple were conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians. **That was, perhaps, the most traumatic event for the Hebrew people, until the Holocaust – during and around World War II, when 6 million Jews were murdered.** The capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 587 B.C. shook the survivors to the core. They felt God had abandoned them and tried to understand why it happened. **Much of the Old Testament – in something like the form we have of it today was written down as a result of the exiles’ identity meltdown!** The emphasis on the failure of God’s People to obey the Almighty’s Law became a major explanation for why the LORD God allowed the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and the Holy Temple. It was out of the Law tradition that the party of the Pharisees would eventually evolve, dominate Jewish Society, and become enemies of Jesus.

**Chapters 40-55 of the Book of Isaiah include a different response to the separation from God and the destruction of the nation. This prophetic tradition promised a New Covenant Relationship between God and the People of God.** It would begin to be fulfilled as God enabled the Jews to return to Jerusalem some 50 years after its fall – 50 years following the start of the Babylonian Exile. Isaiah 55 summarizes God’s promise of this rebirth.

Today's Reading reveals the Trustworthiness of God's Word – of the Almighty's Promises about that Welcomed Future. So, God spoke through the prophet declaring **God's Word is the source of life**, just as precipitation is when it waters the soil! The LORD God continued to speak through the prophet, *"So also will be the Word that I speak — it will not fail to do what I plan for it; it will do everything I send it to do."* **What a wonderful promise – declaration – Word of God! You and I, all of us, can Trust God's Word Will Not Fail!** Frankly, that is a generalization, which I believe we can faithfully apply to all God said or says through the Almighty's prophets.

With reference to what God communicated through the prophet in chapters 40-55 in Isaiah, the final Words of God at the conclusion of chapter 55 report the wondrous experience of living out the beginning of the fulfillment of God's New Covenant Relationship with humanity! The Lord God declares through the prophet, *"You will leave Babylon with joy; you will be led out of the city in peace. The mountains and hills will burst into singing, and the trees will shout for joy."* Those Words of God were clearly intended to encourage and give confidence to a whole new generation of Jews, so when the time came, they would not falter – not remain in Babylon, which was the only place they had known. Instead, they would trust God and make the long and arduous journey back to their ancestral homeland – the Promised Land!

The very last Words of God in chapter 55 provided further encouragement by promising a special and dramatic sign, saying, *"Cypress trees will grow where now there are briars; myrtle trees will come up in place of thorns. This will be a sign that will last forever, a reminder of what I, the LORD, have done."* Indeed, 50 years after the Fall of Jerusalem, Cyrus conquered the Babylonians and both allowed and enabled the Jews to return to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple!

Lest we think, "That's all fine and dandy for them but what is the relevance for me – for us?", theologian and scholar, John Holbert, provides a short and succinct answer, "No portion of the Hebrew Bible has been more important for the formation of the New Testament than the part of Isaiah we know as II-Isaiah, Isaiah 40-55. In these sixteen chapters, we find passage after passage that helped the early Christian churches clarify their notions of who Jesus was for them and what they were to do in the light of his coming." Holbert concludes, **"And Isaiah 55 is particularly illuminating ... as we explore the meaning of the journey Jesus calls us to take."**

(<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Gospel-Isaiah-John-Holbert-02-25-2013.html#ixzz36oaH14Ef>)

Before concluding our consideration of the importance of the Reading today for each of us and for the whole community of the People of God, let me call your attention again to the Call To Worship. It is from the First Chapter of the Gospel of John. As John Holbert suggested, the early Christian Community came to see Isaiah chapters 40-55 as having meaning and importance on two levels. One is obviously what it meant to the Jews who eventually decided to return to Jerusalem after the Fall of Babylon. **The other is a more universal promise of God to establish a New Relationship – New Covenant between the Almighty and humanity through God's Anointed One – the Messiah – One through Whom ultimately God's Kingdom would be fully revealed.**

Chapter 1 of the Gospel of John declares God's Word – the aspect of the Almighty through which Creation and Life come is what manifested the Divine Parent's Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love bringing about the Reconciliation with God and humanity in the flesh – in the one we declare as our Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. **He is the Word of God Who Will Not Fail to Fulfill the Almighty's Promises and Purpose!**

Therefore, you and I – we and all people are enabled to **Trust God's Word and to Respond to our own alienation – despair – separation from God and one another through God's Word – God's Promises – the Word Made Flesh – God's Son, Jesus Christ!** The Word of God spoken through the prophet in our Reading, *"You will leave Babylon with joy; you will be led out of the city in peace. The mountains and hills will burst into singing, and the trees will shout for joy."*, is also given to us for encouragement and to enable us to **boldly live out the New Life in Jesus Christ – to welcome God's New Covenant Relationship with us and to joyously declare our "peace" – shalom with our Divine Parent, one another, and ourselves.** Amen.