

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

We can identify death in every direction. In addition to the growing pain, debilitation, and decay wrought by COVID-19, we see war, hunger, addiction, ethnic and racially-driven violence, poverty, a dying climate, and broken hearts.

This is not a new story. The children of Israel surely saw death in every direction, wandering in the desert and at least occasionally wondering about their next meal. Paul looks at his own life and, at first, sees nothing beyond spiritual death. He reminds us that death is not just physical, but also spiritual. Then, in the parable of the sower, three-fourths of the seeds die and three-fourths of the sections of the field are inhospitable to flourishing life. Sometimes, life isn't even given a chance. We might look at the world and ourselves and only see the places that are absent and inhospitable to God's love.

Today's texts all go a step further, however. They reveal God bringing forth life where there is only death and separation in every direction. First, God renews the covenant with the children of Israel. After their own failures and disobedience, God restores a relationship with the children of Israel. Paul reflects on God growing new branches where old tree branches had fallen away. The parable of the sower elicits reflection, repentance, and, ultimately, new life from its readers and hearers in considering the sort of spiritual life they practice. Are we hospitable or inhospitable to God's word? This parable is a vivid reminder of all God overcomes—rocks, scorching sun, thorns, and snatching—to bring life to the world. God brings forth life in places where people see only death.

Let Us Be Gathered

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,
who forgives all our sin,
whose mercy endures forever.
Amen.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God.
Silence is kept for reflection.

Most merciful God,
we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.
We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.
Forgive us, renew us, and lead us,
so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your holy name.
Amen.

God, who is rich in mercy,
loved us even when we were dead in sin,
and made us alive together with Christ.
By grace you have been saved.

In the name of † Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.
Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit,
that Christ may live in your hearts through faith.
Amen.

Gathering Song

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Garden Grove, California, provides the leadership for our gathering song this week. Let us sing "Open Now Thy Gates of Beauty" (ELW #533).

Here is the video link: <https://vimeo.com/436954783>. Words are included in the video.

Prayer of the Day

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we thank you for planting in us the seed of your word.
By your Holy Spirit help us to receive it with joy,
live according to it, and grow in faith and hope and love,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Let Us Hear God's Word

A reading from Isaiah:

⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
¹²For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
¹³Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 55)

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

A reading from the Psalms:

⁹You visit the earth and water it abundantly;
you make it very plenteous; the river of God is full of water.
You prepare the grain, for so you provide for the earth.
¹⁰**You drench the furrows and smooth out the ridges;
with heavy rain you soften the ground and bless its increase.**
¹¹You crown the year with your goodness,
and your paths overflow with plenty.
¹²**May the fields of the wilderness be rich for grazing,
and the hills be clothed with joy.**
¹³May the meadows cover themselves with flocks,
and the valleys cloak themselves with grain;
let them shout for joy and sing. (Psalm 65)

A reading from Romans:

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Romans 8)

Word of God. Word of life.

Thanks be to God.

The holy gospel according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." (Matthew 13)

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Reflection on the Readings

As the preacher John L. Lewis, Jr., succinctly puts it, "a clear vision of the future begins with hope."

However, speaking hope to a people who have been living in exile for a long time comes with unique challenges. When everything keeps looking worse, how do you inspire faith, confidence, and possibility that can grow into a clear vision for the future? Every seed of a word can appear to be falling amid thorns and rocks. It is even more difficult when life in the difficult soil of exile and quarantine becomes "the new normal." This is true for all experiences of exile—exile from community, exile from home, exile from family, exile from opportunity, exile from justice, exile from equity, exile from work and the vocation of a career.

To think and imagine new possibilities beyond our present circumstances has thus become a challenge right now for every assembly, every neighborhood, and every community in the world.

Excitement and enthusiasm for initial possibilities and early efforts become neutralized and weakened as we are faced with the pragmatic complexity of life circumstances. A word of hope that relies on the single moment of a mountaintop experience does not and will not endure.

Gracefully, the word of God that Isaiah brings to us today does not take such an approach. Instead, it reflects an understanding of hope inspired by moments of wholeness in the context of everyday life.

It starts with a hopeful invitation. God's claim that "my ways are higher than your ways" is not a put-down to us, but a challenge to look up and to look outward beyond ourselves. But God knows that hope not rooted in the realities of the moment often leads to even deeper despair. And so God's word of hope is not so unrooted or so disconnected.

Rather, it is rooted in the deepest of realities—in the reality of creation itself. Isaiah sees the evidence of God's faithfulness to hope in the rhythmic nature of creation. Although God's ways and thoughts are higher than the earth, things that are high will come down, just as rain comes down on the earth to nourish it back to health.

Of course, the natural cycle of creation is not a simple mechanical process that occurs automatically. As we hear from the prophet, God loves and cares about the people and is passionately involved with creation. The sources of hope are active extensions of God's personal and continuing involvement. Just as rain and snow "do not return [to heaven] until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater," God's word will do likewise. "It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

This means that God sows hope in real and observable change. Just as seasons are recognized by the changing colors of the leaves, the people of God will know that their lives have been restored when thorns have been replaced by the cypress and the brier by the myrtle. Liberation from exile means change that is tangible and discernible.

Change also serves another purpose—it is more than just cosmetic updates and adding a few garden ornaments. Change serves as a reminder of from where we came. It represents hope that we never make the same mistakes again.

God works to enact this change by casting the hopeful seed of God's word everywhere. No boundaries. No borders. No self-imposed thresholds. Good soil will be found, and it will be enough to overcome the experiments of any bad. In the days when Jesus first told his parable, a seven-fold harvest of was as decent as one could hope to realize. Ten-fold was outstanding! The minimum thirty-fold that Jesus promises for God's word—well, that's beyond any dream. It's more than enough to cover losses amid the bad soils. It's more than enough to provide for all. It's more than enough to overcome the challenges of rocks, thorns, and death. It's enough to bring life to the world.

This is the hope that God's brings to us. But remember this hope is not the end goal. No, not at all. It is simply the start to a clear vision for the future—a vision for life after exile.

Hymn of the Day

From United in Faith Lutheran Church in the Dunning neighborhood of Chicago, Pastor Carla Thompson Powell leads us in *a capella* singing of our hymn of the day, "Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil" (ELW # 512).

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/fNJ1wLPG4w0>.

*Lord, let my heart be good soil,
open to the seed of your word.
Lord, let my heart be good soil,*

*where love can grow and peace is understood.
When my heart is hard, break the stone away.
When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.
When my heart is lost, lead me on your way.
Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart,
Lord, let my heart be good soil.*

Prayers of Intercession

Praying separately in our homes yet united in the Spirit, let us together intercede for all the needs of the world. In response to each bid, you are invited to offer your own prayers, silently or aloud, and to conclude each petition with the words, "Your mercy is everlasting."

A brief silence.

We pray for our congregation and for all the churches in our neighborhoods.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for missionaries and for newly planted congregations around the world.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for those for whom growth in faith is difficult.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for farms and fields that are devastated by drought.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for all animals in search of water.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for everyone who is suffering from the heat.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for peace throughout the world, especially in the Middle East.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for the government of our country, states, counties, and cities.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for our society to be purged of racism.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for the thousands who each day are contracting COVID-19.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for those without jobs or health care.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.
We pray for medical workers and researchers.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for all who are sick.
Take time for prayer, especially for Pat, Valetta, Paul, Vallie, LaVaune, Kathy, Frank, Lisa, Rita, April, Bev, Bob, Beth, Marlene, and all those we name before you now.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray for all who are burdened by anxiety.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We pray, each of us, for ourselves.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

We thank God for Nathan Söderblom, whom we commemorate today, for all who were dedicated to ecumenism, and for all who have died in the faith.
Take time for prayer.

O God, rain down your mercy on us: your mercy is everlasting.

O merciful God, receive these prayers, and grant us your Spirit of peace and joy, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Offering Prayer

Merciful God,
as grains of wheat scattered upon the hills
were gathered together to become one bread,
so let your church be gathered together
from the ends of the earth into your kingdom,
for yours is the glory through Jesus Christ, now and forever.
Amen.

Let Us Be Sent in Service

Sending Song

Our sending song this week is “On What Has Now Been Sown” (ELW #550). From Florida, Noaka Okada Hill is back this week to lead us as she once again plays piano and sings multiple parts in harmony.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/J-it-nUxvMg>.

- 1 *On what has now been sown
your blessing, Lord, bestow;
the pow'r is yours alone
to make it sprout and grow.
O Lord, in grace the harvest raise,
and yours alone shall be the praise!*

- 2 *To you our wants are known,
from you are all our pow'rs;
accept what is your own
and pardon what is ours.
Our praises, Lord, and prayers receive
and to your word a blessing give.*

- 3 *Oh, grant that each of us,
now met before you here,
may meet together thus
when you and yours appear,
and follow you to heav'n, our home.
E'en so, Amen! Lord Jesus, come!*

Sending Prayer

Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen.

Benediction

The Lord bless us and keep us.
The Lord's face shine on us with grace and mercy.
The Lord look upon us with favor and ✠ give us peace.
Amen.