

IF GOD WERE SILENT***(Isaiah 55:10-11)***

Most of you who know me know that I'm a real city boy at heart. I'm convinced that God sent me here to Wisconsin to experience how the "other half" of the country lives—that other half being the part that is not so urban in nature. It has been one of the most joyous experiences of my professional as well as my personal life to co-pastor a congregation with people in it who grew up in more rural areas, some way out in the country, some on working farms of all kinds; some who had to go and hunt down their own dinner; people who, because of where they are from and how they grew up, have some different orientations than I to what life is made of, and to what life looks like, and to how life gets enriched, and to how life gets endangered.

But just so you know, Wisconsin isn't my very *first* rural rodeo!

The very *first* time I experienced living in a rural area and experiencing a different orientation to life because of it was 36 years ago, the very first time I stepped foot on the continent of Africa. From January to July of

1981 I was privileged to do theological study in the country of Tanzania, in East Africa, amid the lush greenery, serene peacefulness, and sun-kissed beauty of the land that we ALL are originally from.

It's the first verse of our first reading from Isaiah that takes me back to the time I spent in Tanzania, and the spiritual learnings that came of it for me. God says, through the prophet Isaiah:

“For 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 . . .”

That verse brings to my mind the vast expanse of vegetation that met my eyes every day that I was there in East Africa. Everywhere I went I experienced signs and colors and odors of life all around me: mango, papaya and banana trees, beautiful flowers, grasslands and bushes, animal life of every kind, majestic mountains and flowing waters.

I remember climbing mountains to visit the mountainside village churches, hiking through the coffee-fields, trekking through thick brush, using banana leaves as umbrellas in the midday rain, passing by the fish

markets and seeing the life of the waters being used to sustain the life of the land.

Everywhere I went, and every place I looked, there were signs of *abundant life!*

And I was led to realize that all of this was possible because of the *rain* that came down from the heavens, the life-giving water that falls mercifully from the sky, and which makes things *spring forth*, and which makes things *sprout and grow*.

Rain, which provides *seed* to the sower and *bread* to the eater; *beauty* to the eye and *oxygen* to the air; *greenness* to the trees and *color* to the flowers; *coolness* to the earth and *blessing* to the people.

And—city boy that I am—I was finally led to realize that *rain* meant a very different thing in *rural Africa* than it did in *urban America*.

Because for THIS city boy, rain—right behind snow and ice—is the most common weather-related inconvenience that I can think of! It slows down traffic, it keeps your feet wet, it floods things, it ruins outdoor

plans, it takes the shine off of the car . . . it's really just an *urban inconvenience*, and that's the way I had always pretty much felt about rain—until I went to Africa.

Most of Africa is not urban, so they don't get water pumped to their houses; they depend on the rain for much of their water. In fact, they depend on the rain for a lot of things—some of the same things people in many areas of Wisconsin depend on the rain for:

- ❖ To water food-producing crops and fields and plants;
- ❖ To have water for drinking and cooking;
- ❖ To keep the streams and rivers flowing;
- ❖ To keep the trees and flowers growing;
- ❖ To provide water for their animals.

I found out that rain is not the urban inconvenience in Africa that it is in Chicago or New York. I discovered that in Africa, rain is an important part of the essence of life!

And so imagine what happens when the rain doesn't come.

II.

I was in Africa when the rain didn't come.

The rainy season was supposed to come the early part of the year.

Everyone planted their fields, and prepared for the rain. But the rain didn't come.

The sun burned up the seed in the field; so they plowed and planted their fields again, and prepared for the rain. But again, the rain didn't come.

And for the first time in my life, rain was no longer just an "urban inconvenience." Quite the contrary, the lack of rain became a *community crisis*. People depended on what they grew for the food or the little money or bartering power that they would have for the year, so for their seed to burn up in the fields—twice—would really set them back.

And so they did what any faithful, spiritually-connected people would do—they prayed.

- They prayed for the heavens to open up and for God’s life-giving nectar to come pouring down;
- They prayed for water to come tumbling from the mountains, and to fill the rivers and the valleys, and to wet the soil where their very lives were planted.
- They prayed to the God who they knew was the keeper and giver of all things to rain down on them and their fields the liquid grace and mercy that they needed to continue to live.

And in that praying number was a descendant of Africa far removed from the soil and the land, but who had been blessed to come home to learn that rain was not just an “urban inconvenience.”

That far-removed descendant of Africa was *me*.

Finally, right at the point when time was running out—but not hope—the rains came!

HALLELUJAH! In Swahili they shouted ASANTE MUNGU! And a poem was written, entitled “The Rains Have Come”

The rains have come; and the fragile fruits of faith, too, shall blossom from seeds sown in the rich black soil of Africa's love.

The rains have come; a gentle blessing to cool the thirst that threatens with death a growing thing.

The rains have come; and needs reach up like hands that raise the cup to receive life-giving water.

Asante Mungu! The rains have come!

And so we return to the first verse of our text:

For 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 . . .

III.

And now, in the second verse of our text, we hear God say through the prophet Isaiah:

So 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.

That makes God's word pretty essential and life-sustaining for our growth, just as the rain and snow are essential to the growth of the earth's vegetation.

Just how essential and life-giving IS God's word?

FIRST, we are reminded that *God spoke creation into being* with that life-giving word. The scriptures remind us that God SAID:

- *“Let there be light”*—and there was;
- *“Let the waters bring forth”*—and they did;
- *“Let the earth bring forth”*—and it did;
- *“Let man and woman be made in my image”*—and we were;
- God spoke—and the stars began to twinkle, the mountains rose up and the valleys sank down;
- God spoke—and water became liquid, rocks became hard, rain became wet, and snow became cold;
- God spoke—and the planets appeared, the universe stretched itself out, and existence as we know it came into being.

That’s some kinda word, that can even speak existence into existence!

We are also reminded—through that life-giving word of God—that Jesus IS the life-giving word of God!

✚ John's gospel says, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word WAS God;*

✚ The writer of 1 John calls Jesus "the Word of Life"

✚ The writer of Revelation describes Jesus as *the one whose robe is dipped in blood, and whose name is the Word of God.*

We know Jesus as the Word of God because we know him as the One who is the Ultimate Personification of All That God Wants Humanity To Be. God speaks to us through Jesus, and Jesus is therefore God's Word.

IV.

God speaks to us through Creation, through Jesus, even through the testimony of others.

But what if God were silent? What if God did not speak? What if God's word—like the rain sometimes—DIDN'T come? Let me tell you what would NOT be here if God were silent:

"In the beginning . . ." there would be NOTHING. No creation spoken into existence, no light and darkness, no day and night, no earth and

sky, no fish or fowl, no trees or flowers, no mountains or rivers, no male or female, no me or you—nothing! There would be nothing . . .

If God were silent there would be no scriptures, no testimony given from that great cloud of witnesses from whom we learned the truth of the song *“there is no secret what God can do; what he’s done for others he can do for you.”*

If God were silent we would not have heard the stories of Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, or Sarah, Rachel or Ruth. We would not have heard the testimonies of OUR ancestors or grandparents, or of the preachers or the deacons or the happy church sisters! We would not have heard their testimony because there would BE no testimony, because there would be no word to testify about!

If God were silent there would be no Jesus to unbind us in ways we didn’t even know we were bound;

There would be no Jesus to go before us and fight the battle with Satan, sin and death;

There would be no Jesus to preach and teach, to heal and bless, to walk and talk with, to show us the way to the kingdom of God;

There would be no Jesus to die on the cross, to let us know how precious we are in God's sight;

There would be no Jesus to be raised from the dead by the power and justice of God, to let us know that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;

If God were silent, there would be no way for us to know that God is a friend to the friendless, a home to the homeless, a mother to the motherless, and a father to the fatherless.

Well, I've got some good news for you today:

Hallelujah! Asante Mungu! Praise the Lord!

GOD IS NOT SILENT!

For 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; so 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.

Beloved, God's word is sent into our midst so that we can have life, and have it abundantly! It may seem like there is a drought of God's word sometimes, but God's word is always near; never far; and never returning to God empty.

In other words, God's word won't return to GOD before it does its wonder working power within YOU.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

