

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pentecost 8

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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

It's monsoon season!

—Isaiah 55:10,11

The day is hot and sultry. It's a typical summer day in Arizona, with temperatures soaring well into triple digits. Green plants wither in the scorching sun. The ground is parched and thirsty. In the sweltering sky clouds begin to form. They become giant thunderclouds, billowing pillars that soar miles into the air. The sky grows dark. Lightning flashes, and peals of thunder roll across the landscape. Then the rain begins, gentle at first, then a torrential downpour. The temperature plummets. The thirsty land drinks in the rain, and the desert is refreshed.

It's monsoon season! This time of year we look forward to the seasonal rains that bring cool refreshment to the desert. If it weren't for the seasonal rains the Sonoran desert of Arizona would look like Death Valley—and who wants to go there in July? The rain is refreshment. The rain is life.

The climate in the land of Palestine is very similar to what we know here in Arizona. But the people in Isaiah's day didn't have dams along the Salt River to store up water to irrigate the agriculture. In the days of God's ancient people Israel, they depended completely upon the infrequent seasonal rain showers to make the crops grow. They relied upon the snow that fell up north in Lebanon, on the slopes of Mt. Hermon, to melt and flow down through the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River, so that they could water their crops. Especially in a semi-arid land like the land of Israel, it is the rain and the snow that falls up in the mountains that give life.

The Lord teaches us today through the prophet Isaiah, *“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”* God's word is the water from heaven that keeps our faith green and growing. For our faith and for our lives, God's word is refreshment. God's word is life.

But what is that life-giving word? We know that God's word embraces two main teachings: the law and the gospel. The law shows us our sin and convicts us of our guilt before God. It cuts deeply into human hearts, inspires in us the fear and dread of God's anger, and points out very clearly that because of our disobedience against God, we deserve nothing but his eternal condemnation. The gospel, on the other hand, proclaims the sweet message of forgiveness—and that's especially the word that Isaiah refers to. The gospel gives life. The sweet, refreshing message of the gospel showers down upon human hearts that are heavy and burdened and afraid, and assures us of God's solution to our eternal problem. The refreshing gospel speaks to us of Jesus Christ, how he lived in our place as our perfect Substitute, how he gave his life for us on the cross, how he rose from the dead on the third day to show to all the world that sin had been paid for. The refreshing gospel sweeps away our doubts about life and our fear of death, and rains down on us the sweet comfort of forgiveness. The gospel speaks gently to our hearts and says, “Take heart! Your sins are forgiven!” The gospel tells us that our relationship with God has been restored through the blood of Christ. We can now call Jesus our brother and God our Father and claim a place in his eternal family. The gospel goes into all the world with the embracing message that God our heavenly Father desires that every single human being on the planet should know his love—a Father's love—and repent of their sins and believe the good news and be saved. This is the word, the refreshing word of grace that fills our hearts with joy and sweetens our lives with promise and keeps our faith in Jesus our Savior green and growing.

When the gospel touches our hearts, it produces exactly the fruit that God plans for it to produce. The confidence of the gospel produces in us the peace of God. The Bible calls it “The peace of God that transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). Confident in the Lord, we don't have to stress about our todays or worry about our tomorrows. While the world goes wild and gets worked up over Covid, Christians are saying, “God is in control. The world isn't going to come to an end until God wants it to — and when it happens that will be just fine with us!”

The gospel working in our hearts renews our commitment to living for others and serving them in the name of Jesus. 2 Corinthians 5 teaches us that “[Jesus] died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised to life again” (2 Cor. 5:15). Think of how that plays out in the Christian family. In a household where the peace of the gospel reigns, husbands and wives celebrate the blessings of marriage by submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Husbands exercise their God-given role of leadership in a loving, Christ-like way. Wives carry out their role of submitting to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. Children honor and obey their parents and give them the love and respect that God calls for. In our daily lives the gospel shows us where we can serve others, just as Christ served us. We look for opportunities to help the downtrodden and the hurting around us, lifting them up and sharing their burdens. The word of life produces abundant fruit that serves God in thankful living.

What happens in the desert after a rain? When the land drinks in the rain, things *have* to grow. After the winter rains in the spring of the year the wildflowers explode in profusion, with brilliant colors covering the desert. The same is true after the monsoon showers. The mesquite, the palo verde, the creosote, the cactus – things *have* to get green. You even know that after the rain come the weeds. You can plan on it. They *have* to grow when they're showered with the seasonal rains, on the hillsides, in vacant lots, even in the yard where they're most annoying. The rains come and the weeds follow shortly thereafter, because the rain from heaven makes everything bud and flourish.

God tells us that his word is the same way. When human beings are exposed to God's word, something *has* to happen. God's word never returns to him empty. It always produces the result that he has planned for it and achieves the purpose which he sent it. That's very encouraging to me when I climb into this pulpit and proclaim the word of God to you. I know that it *has* to have an effect—not because of any power or persuasion on my part, but simply because of the inherent power of the word of God to accomplish exactly what God wants it to do. The gospel *will* touch hearts. The gospel *will* change lives. God guarantees it.

That's also a tremendous encouragement to you when you share God's word with the people around you. Have you ever stood around the copy machine or the water cooler at work, and let it be known that you're a Christian, and told people what the name of Jesus means to you, and you got the reaction, "You believe *that*?" Perhaps you walked away from that conversation thinking to yourself, "Well, that was worthless. What did I accomplish by my witness? My words fell on deaf ears and hardened hearts." Take heart, friends! You don't know whether the seed that you planted will take root weeks or months or years or decades from now, but God is the only one who can make it grow. You and I are just like the sower in Jesus' parable today, who cast the word of God onto different types of soil, and it was God who made it grow. The other thing to remember is that the effectiveness of God's powerful word does not depend upon your ability to sell, arm-twist, argue or persuade. You and I don't have to be salespeople peddling the gospel. The gospel itself is the power of God for salvation, and whether you and I speak of Christ ineloquently or not, with lisping lips and stammering tongue, we unleash the full power of the gospel of salvation.

The world is a parched and dreary place. You watch the news? You read news articles on the Internet? I don't even like to get the news these days, it's so dreary and negative, it makes me sad. It wants to suck the life out of me. Isn't it refreshing to have God's Word to turn to? Isn't it comforting to know that even in a parched and dreary world, we are always safe in God's care? And when God promises to refresh us, when he tells us he loves us and cares for us, he doesn't just speak dry and empty words, but he confirms his love for us by giving his Son to die on the cross for our forgiveness, and he gives us his Spirit as a down payment on the life he has promised us. This is the refreshment of the gospel that slakes our thirst and makes us green and growing, even as we walk through the wilderness of this world. The showers of God's Word refresh our soul.

But there's a sobering fact about thunderstorms that makes us stop and reflect. It's very simply this: rain showers move on. The refreshing rain drenches the land for a while, and the land drinks in their bounty from heaven, and the trees and the flowers and the bushes and the cactus bloom and flourish, but then they stop. The rain moves on. There may be a long dry spell before the rains return. Martin Luther observed that the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is a rain shower that moves on. It waters the land for a while, bringing refreshment and life, but when hearts are hard, and the soil is not fertile, and the refreshing message of forgiveness in Jesus is rejected and pushed away, the rain will move on. For many years our land has been blessed with the life-giving preaching of the gospel of Jesus' forgiveness, life and salvation. As our culture becomes more depraved and God's people grow complacent and the love of many grows cold, the gospel can move on, leaving only a dry and dreary prospect of empty hopelessness, no peace, no forgiveness, no Jesus, no eternal joy and no eternal life. So pray for the preaching of the Word, pray that the Word of life is not rejected, pray that we and others may never despise the Word, so that the Word of life may always refresh us with its truth and lead us to eternal life.

It's no fun to get caught in a thunderstorm, to get pelted with torrential rain and to get drenched. But watching the rain come down and water the land from a safe, dry place where you can see the lightning and hear the thunder, is a beautiful, amazing thing. To step out and smell the desert after the rain is to cherish a fragrance you will never forget. To see the land drink in the rain is to cherish refreshing waters from heaven. In the same way I hope that you and I will always cherish the gospel. Brothers and sisters, cherish the gospel! Cherish the opportunities to drink deeply from the delicious, refreshing word of God that brings so much delight and peace into our lives. Cherish the opportunities you have to be in God's house and drink from the wells of salvation as you sit at the feet of Jesus' word. Cherish the opportunities you have during your day—perhaps during your break or your lunch hour—to drink in the words of Christ. Cherish the opportunities you have to gather your family around the kitchen table for a word of devotion and prayer. It's monsoon season! Let the refreshing showers of God's word water your heart, rejuvenate your soul, and produce a green and growing crop in your life, to the glory of God! Amen.