

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)

NOT WORKS, BUT FAITH

Isaiah 51:1-6

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Analysis by Timothy Hoyer**

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. 2Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. 3For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

4Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. 5I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. 6Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

DIAGNOSIS: Their Works Are But Smoke

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Situation Looks Desperate*

The land of Israel is full of waste places and wilderness and desert. Joy and gladness are missing, and the voice of a song has gone astray. All those things are signs of God's judgment against the people of Israel's lack of trust in God, proven by their abuse of the poor, their unfairly balanced weights in the marketplace, their enjoyment of riches while ignoring the widow and orphan and while blaming the widow and orphan for what happened to them.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *They Pursue Their Own Righteousness*

Even now, the people pursue, strive after, do things, to make themselves righteous, as if their effort will enable them to find the LORD. They trust themselves to do that. They put their faith in their own ability, as if their works are a magnet that will pull the LORD out from being hidden. The more works they do, the more powerful the pull of their magnet, so powerful that God cannot resist.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *God Looks At Us As If We Were Gnats*

But in that work to pull God in, stop and look at the heavens and look at the earth. Even if your works had a pull as strong as the gravity of the earth (and then the earth was greatest and only place under the heavens), know that when God's justice happens—and it will happen swiftly—all the works that pursue righteousness will vanish like smoke and wear out like a garment. They will amount to nothing. All people, all of them mind you, will die not having caught righteousness.

PROGNOSIS: His Faith Was Reckoned to Him As Righteousness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God Promises Comfort*

Yet hear the promises of the LORD. Listen to what God will do, not you, but God. Look to where you come from—from Abraham and Sarah. It is Abraham who trusted God, and God reckoned that faith of Abraham to him as righteousness. Or as Paul testifies in Romans 4.5, “But to the one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.” God promises to comfort the waste places by making them a garden. God promises that his arm will rule the people. God promises to deliver people from their chasing after God, their pride, and from the demands that require them to do things to find God. Instead, God will come, God’s arms will surround them. And God being present with people, present with comfort and mercy, will be forever and never end. Death cannot take them from God’s presence anymore. This comfort is realized in Jesus, whose arms stretch wide in mercy; who gives comfort by bringing righteousness enough for all. God doesn’t wait for us to chase after him, he comes down to us and shows true righteousness by giving away his life and having his faith reckoned as new life.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution) : *Wait and Hope*

“Wait” and “hope” (v. 5) are the words for faith, for trust, for depending on God. God, who commands people to wait and hope, also gives them trust in him by joining them to his promises through Christ. Without Christ we have no hope of prospering in faith. But trusting in Christ, we look more like Abraham and Sarah who, though they apparently had no future hope, found it in God. God keeps his promises, does marvelous things, so wait and hope in God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Situation Calls for Singing and Gladness*

Joy, gladness, thanksgiving, and the sound of song can happen now as the people wait and hope. God has made a promise and we

can rejoice. People are to tell those who pursue and seek that they can now stop and sing, for God's promises are for them. God is present in his promises. God does the work, God comes to us, God finds us, and God declares, not our works, but our faith to be righteousness.

Note: God's promises told by Isaiah were for the people of Abraham and Sarah who were in exile. As such, they are not universal promises for all people. As Luther would say, "Look at who is being spoken to." We cannot preach these promises of God as if they were meant for us. We cannot promise, for example, that God will make the drought of California a garden. But God has made us promises, the promises of forgiveness and life and mercy and the Holy Spirit, and given and fulfilled by Jesus dying and rising for us. So just as the people hewn from the rock of Abraham and Sarah trusted God who made them promises, so we, hewn from the rock of Christ, get to trust the promises of God made to us in Jesus.