

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

THE EVERLASTING SIGN OF THE CROSS

Isaiah 55:10-13

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

55:10 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, 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 briar 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Abusing God's Words

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Civilization, Justice, and the Conspiracy of Politics and Religion*

God's words are always either missed or misused. Israel, which had/has God's words inscribed in her history and then in many writings, was/is no exception to this rule, which resulted in her desire for a king other than God (1 Sam. 8). Israel's separation of politics and religion was only apparent, however, and resulted finally in her Exile from the land of promise. This

is the broad historical context of our text, the utterances of the prophet known to us as Second Isaiah (Isa. 40-55). More generally, in creating civilization and culture, politics and religion conspire together, or pseudo-separately (as in Israel of old and in modern Western powers), to create the illusion of a just or righteous society. Thus begins war in its widest conception, but which is simultaneously the engine of social cohesiveness and cultural innovation. In war, civilizations generate the false premise that we (the good guys) are simply following the will of God. Our delusional pretense to righteousness among ourselves is thus also a pretense to righteousness before God. Civilization-under-God is indeed the word or will or law of God, but that particular “snow . . . from heaven” (v. 10) turns idolatrous as we seek to wrest from God control of our own lives and the lives of others. Though we are beneficiaries of civilization’s gifts, including its relative justice, we always manipulate God’s words and misinterpret them for our own purposes. Whether we ignore God’s words or deny them as words from God, our tangible failure to be a civilization-under-God is a demonstration “from heaven” (v. 10; see Rom. 1:18-20) that God’s word or “purpose” (v. 11) is at work both *for us*, to create and sustain us against the chaos of our mutual desires, and *against us*, to show us our failure to live together in peace.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Idolatry as Separating the Words of God from Faith in God*

We do not let God’s words or purposes remain God’s alone; we always twist them to into our own misguided words and purposes. Even as God’s law-full word creates for us civilization and culture, that same word finds in us an irremediable idolatry. As history proves—Israel’s history especially, every attempt to quash our (more noticeable) idolatries only succeeds in substituting one idolatry for another. Idolatry proves that we

have not heard God's words aright. Desiring a king of our own is simply an example of not wanting, or rather not trusting, God to rule over us. There is nothing that we do or can do or even desire to do, whether in building a civilization or in praising God, that is not idolatrous to the core. Whether God's word is for us or against us (as we judge it), we do not want God to "accomplish" or "succeed" that which he "purposes" (v. 11). To no avail of course, for God's purposes will always be accomplished at the time and place of his own choosing. But we resist God in everything because we resist God from the heart and idolize everything and everyone. We especially abuse God's words when we idolize those very words and actions by separating them from trust (that is, faith) in God himself. This separation, like the conspiratorial separation of politics and religion, lies at the very heart of *sin*, the word we use to describe our broken relationship to God. Our hearts are, as Calvin said, nothing other than "idol factories."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Separation from God

Without God's intervention (v. 12), Israel would have remained in Exile or become assimilated into Babylonian society, and Israel would have lost out on the promise of her election (Gen. 12). Similarly, our continuous failure to create a civilization based on faith in God will finally result in our destruction. That, too, is the "word" and will and "purpose" of God. That we cannot avoid our final destruction, our eternal separation from God's promise, is the final purpose of the Law. There are no exceptions.

PROGNOSIS: Included in God's Promissory Word

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : The Grand Promise

God's word to Israel in verses 12-13 ended her Exile and opened the door once again for God to fulfill his promise to Abram (see Isa. 49:1-6). This promissory "word" is altogether different from that previous law-full "word" that both created civilization and found us guilty of idolatry. In the short term, the word of promise to Israel, that her Exile is ended (vv. 12-13), was received in joy. What "comfort" (Isa. 40:1) *that* word from Second Isaiah was to the children of promise! Grander still: what comfort, what salvation—against the original sin of idolatry—was God's word-made-flesh sent forth from the mouth of God in Jesus Christ! *That word*, God's own but costly solution to our seemingly unavoidable destruction, "succeeded" (we ourselves are witness) against all human expectations: by crushing idolatry in the flesh (v. 11; John 19:30) and raising up from the dead a new humanity unfettered by the Law. A grander purpose far beyond the understanding of the first children of promise! A grander purpose far beyond the narrow land of Israel! For, in the self-giving life and death of Jesus, sealed by his resurrection from the dead, many more people are now included in God's great promise to Abram. In Jesus, God's enfleshed word of promise, crucified and risen for us, civilization gives way to the kingship of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Everlasting Sign of the Cross*

As Luther rightly put it in his Large Catechism, "word and faith" go together. By "word" Luther means of course God's grand Promise fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. Trusting in that word, Jesus, we trust in God himself against our own legalistic presumptions and idolatries (see Rom. 10 and Gal. 3). This "we" is not the same we as in Step 2, but the "we" who are included in Jesus' death, the we who have died with him and live in him by faith alone. This new we-of-faith is a new creation of God that has no earthly substance or body that can be measured or

controlled; we persist moment to moment only as trust-in-Jesus. We might wonder with unbridled “joy” (v. 12, applied now also to us) about the full and final extent of God’s Promise, but its surety and “everlasting sign” (v. 13) for us who have died in Christ, by faith, is the *Cross*—a death sign for Christ and also for us. Thus, “faith and cross” go together just as “word and faith” go together. This is always of course the cross *of Jesus*. It is not the idea of Jesus or the idea of God’s goodness or Promise in which we trust, but the *Person* who was crucified and resurrected. Jesus’ “sign” of salvation, in fulfillment of Genesis 12:3 as well as of Isaiah 55:13, is *his* Cross.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Clinging to the Cross*

How then does the Cross change the way we sainted sinners go about the business of civilization (the problem in Step 1)? By clinging to the Cross. This is what faith *does*. When civilization and its proffered gifts let us down, as they surely will, we cling to the Cross as God’s preeminent gift to the world. With this gift, we are freed at long last to live for others, including our sister Israel. And when death arrives to claim our mortal bodies, the Cross and the Gospel it loudly proclaims will be our only comfort. The Cross sees us through the false premise (war, broadly understood) by which civilization has heretofore been founded, and gifts us the freedom not to take our old-selves or our so-called contributions and failures too seriously. True, by clinging to the Cross we will suffer the enmity and scorn which is invariably heaped upon those who live by faith alone. It may be that God will use our faith induced sufferings (love) to lighten the burdens of others, but that is not for us to determine or measure. Yet of such love the kingship of God is being brought into the world. Love is the secret by-product of faith which is known to God alone. In Christ we have no earthly aims to

achieve, only godly gifts to share. *Clinging to the Cross* does not mean avoiding all those idolatries in Step 1. For as sinners, idolatry follows us into the grave. Rather, clinging to the Cross judges all pretenders or pretenses to what is worth dying for. Clinging to the Cross is trusting in Christ alone for forgiveness and for every assurance of God's relentless love, for a world he himself has redeemed at such great cost.