

Return to the Lord

Isaiah 55:6-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Well, we have belatedly arrived at the last Sunday of our summer worship series called “Seeking Peace Together.”

This series was originally intended to end last Sunday and last week’s guest speaker, Anna Braun, was supposed to preach today. But Anna ran into a scheduling issue and asked if we could switch. So, our wrap up sermon in this series is arriving one week late.

You’ll recall that we’ve spent almost the entire summer in the Old Testament, looking at all kinds of odd stories and conflicted characters. I hope you have found this useful, or at least interesting!

For me, diving back into these old stories—some of which I hadn’t read for a very long time—was a powerful reminder that we take our part in a long history of deeply flawed human beings who nonetheless seek to be faithful, and who are among the means through which God works to make peace in our troubled world.

Today, we’re going to end in the OT but it’s going to kind of be a “big picture” sermon. We’re not going to look at a specific story where peace emerged and what we might learn from it, but the broad vision for peace that guides and shapes all our stories in the meantime.

Isaiah 55 offers us that broad vision of *shalom*, of abundant life. And we’ll get there.

But I want to begin with an article on the “dechuraching of America” that I read this week. You may wonder what on earth “dechuraching” is or what it has to do with Isaiah 55 or with seeking peace.

As is so often the case, I ask for your patience here at the outset. I hope the connections will become more evident throughout.

The article was in *The Atlantic* this week, and the author, Daniel Williams, asked a specific question: “What happens when Americans stop going to church?”¹

(I think we can safely substitute “Canadians” for “Americans,” as the trends, while not identical to America, would be similar here.)

As you are no doubt aware, church attendance has been trending in the wrong direction in the West for a while now (not in other parts of the world, thank God!). What has the fruit of this been?

Well, according to the research, what happens is that people become more polarized and politicized.

They don’t necessarily become atheists or agnostics. They tend to hang on to at least *some* version of Christian belief, but it’s often a politically distorted version.

Jesus gets kicked around like a kind of political football, being (mis)used to add spiritual legitimacy to the political projects of the right and the left.

Additionally, the flight from church has *not* come with a corresponding flight from moralizing. Williams puts it well:

But without a church community, in many cases, the nation’s political system becomes their church—and the results are polarizing. They bring whatever moral and social values they acquired from their church experience and then apply those values in the political sphere with an evangelical zeal.

Again, this seems obviously true to me on both the right and the left. Indeed, some of the most morally zealous people I have encountered have been those whose politics have become their church.

Well, you’ve likely heard me talk about such concerns before so I won’t belabour this. My attention was mainly drawn to the very first line of the article:

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/09/christianity-religion-america-church-polarization/675215/>

Millions of Americans are leaving church, never to return...

Never to return? That seems a rather bold claim. How does the author know this? How could *anyone* claim to know such a thing.

I have been a pastor for a decade and a half now, and I have seen people return.

Sometimes it's young parents who return after a long absence because they have a vague sense that their kids "need something."

Sometimes it's middle-aged people in an existential crisis of meaning and purpose.

Sometimes it is older people licking their wounds after going through terrible things with their kids or grandkids.

Sometimes it's someone in the middle of a predicament of some kind—divorce, death, illness, poverty, career change, etc.

Sometimes it's someone who is just really lonely.

Almost always it's someone who realizes that there is something missing in their life and that this something *somehow* has something to do with God.

This return is not a tidal wave or anything like that. Sometimes it's a barely discernible trickle.

But people *do* return and for all kinds of reasons.

Why? Well, again, I think people are looking for community, sometimes for material assistance, for comfort, for structure. Yes, to all these things.

But I think that fundamentally, we need meaning in our lives. We are meaning-seeking, story-seeking creatures.

Naomi spent most of the Labour Day long weekend sick on the couch, and one of the things she watched during her convalescence was a show called "Blue Zones."

"Blue Zones" are places of the world where people tend to live the longest.²

The host was a guy named Dan Buettner who has studied Blue Zones for 20-plus years, and he takes viewers on a journey to regions with the highest number of centenarians, or people who live to 100: Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; Ikaria, Greece; Nicoya, Costa Rica; and Loma Linda, California.

He discovered four consistent principles that span each zone.

- Eating wisely
- Moving naturally
- Connecting with others
- Having a purpose or outlook.

I don't have much to say about the first two, although I obviously think taking better care of our physical bodies is a desperate need, again particularly in the West.

But the last two obviously piqued my interest as a pastor. Community and meaning. And especially that last one.

Having *purpose* in our lives is connected to longevity and health.

Now, I must hasten to add that longevity isn't everything. Jesus died young. Most of his disciples died young. There is a long history of people who have lived well, who have lived faithfully and beautifully, and not lived long.

And living a long time just for longevity's sake isn't necessarily a good thing either, as some of you know very well, having watched people you love suffer for years near the end of their lives.

But it's still interesting, isn't it? Our health depends, at least in part, on believing that we are part of a story that matters and that is going somewhere. That we matter and that we are going somewhere.

We need to make moral sense of our experiences. We need to have hope. We need to believe that in a world where so much looks bleak so much of the time, there is help from the outside.

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/blue-zone-expert-longevity-lessons-netflix-series/>

We need to believe that we can be forgiven.

Many people spend many of their days ignoring some of these most basic features of what it means to be human. Some even manage to do it for most of their lives.

But very often, some event or crisis or trajectory in our lives will bring these things to the forefront. And then, we return. To the church. To the Lord.

Way back in June when I mapped out this series, I imagined that I would end with this passage on Isaiah and focus on the suggested theme of the worship resources, which was “Rejoicing with Creation.” The theme of “peace with creation” was suggested.

But this week, as I prepared this sermon, I thought, “That’s not where I want to go and that’s not what I think this text is mainly about.”

Yes, there are themes of creation rejoicing at the end, yes there are metaphors drawn from the natural world, yes part of what it means to be people of peace is to seek peace in four directions, with God, within, with our neighbours, and with creation.

All of these are implicit in Isaiah 55.

But the anchor of this whole chapter, which gives this rich vision of abundant life, comes in verses 6-7:

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
⁷ let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

It is an invitation given to a people in exile, far from home (both literally and symbolically), a people who have wandered away from their God and are suffering for their sins of idolatry and injustice.

To these people, Isaiah says, “Seek the Lord while he may be found.” Turn away from the unfruitful paths you have chosen, turn toward the one who has promised life and a future.

Why do you keep going down dead ends, searching for what does not satisfy? Why can you not see that the life I offer will meet your deepest need?

Trust me. Return to me.

The big picture here is of God calling his people back to a vision of beauty and plenty and peace that we are called to participate in, but which we are not, ultimately responsible for bringing about.

And God is still calling his people back. *Return to me. Return to me. This is where you will find life.*

I want to end with a story that I read on Friday in Miroslav Volf’s book *Life Worth Living*. I’ve referred to it before.

The book is based on a course that he co-teaches at Yale. It is one of the most in-demand courses in the school. Many students describe it as “life changing.”

It is, essentially, a course on human flourishing. What is a good life? How should we live? What is true and beautiful? What, ultimately, should we give ourselves to in our handful of decades on the planet?

I want to read one passage from a chapter on suffering:

For three years, our friend Angela Williams Gorrell worked with us at Yale and taught *Life Worth Living*. . . . Just before and during her first semester teaching *Life Worth Living*, she had suffered three tragic losses in quick succession. The bitter juxtaposition put the challenge of living with and through suffering front and center.

One that last day of the semester, she told the heartrending story of one of those losses, the loss of a family member to suicide. Here’s how she recounts it in her book *The Gravity of Joy*:

I opened the passenger door and grabbed my cell phone from the floorboard of the car. I was stunned to discover that I had missed seven calls from Mom and a text...

The text read, "Dustin killed himself."...

Tears streamed down my face like water rushing over a tub filled to the brim. Before thinking, I called Mom back.

I remember screaming "No!" over and over again, crying and demanding she tell me it wasn't true...

I was wandering through the parking lot as I listened to her tell me that it was true. She was still crying when she answered the phone, though she had known for a few hours.

Suddenly, I dropped the phone on the pavement of the church parking lot and wailed.

Angela looked out at our students when she had finished. There was reverent silence. She took a breath and said to them, "I hope you have a vision of life that will sustain you in moments on the pavement. **There will likely be a day when the world stops and your heart breaks and you will need a vision of a life worth living that can survive the storm.** Surely, your vision will be deepened, transformed, sharpened by the days on the pavement, but I hope your vision already has a compass that can orient you or, better yet, an anchor that will hold you.³

Some of you have had your moments on the pavement. Some of us will.

But I think Angela Williams Gorrell put it beautifully and powerfully to that group of students in a classroom. I imagine you could have barely heard a pin drop that day!

You need a vision of life big enough to incorporate what's coming.

What is true of suffering is also true when it comes to our pursuit of peace. We need a vision of life and of God that is big enough to inspire and validate our efforts toward *shalom* in a world where we will very often see the opposite of peace, where our peacemaking efforts will sometimes seem futile and naïve.

³ Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living* (The Open Field, 2023), 202-03

We need a vision of life and of God that is big enough to hold out a hope and a promise that extends beyond our flawed and partial efforts.

For 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.

¹³ Instead 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.

Peace is our future and our holy work in the present because—and *only* because—God has promised peace.

So let us return to the Lord. Again and again and again. And again. That he might have mercy upon us and guide us along the path of peace

Amen.

