

PREPARING FOR RAIN

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 11:13-17; Philemon 1:22

At one of our movie nights this summer we watched "Facing the Giants". And in that movie the football coach of a Christian school was discouraged about the way things were going; there were folks who wanted to get rid of him because he was having an unsuccessful season. He was new at the job which he desperately needed; but things were looking grim. And then one of the other teachers came to him to give him scriptural encouragement from God. Afterward the coach asked the teacher if he really thought God had sent him with that particular scripture and the teacher said that yes, he did. Then the coach shared how he was really struggling and confessed that he just didn't see God at work. At that point the teacher told this story:

"There were two farmers who desperately needed rain, and both of them prayed for rain. But only one of them went out and prepared his fields to receive it. Which one do you think trusted God to send the rain?' The coach replied, 'The one who prepared his fields for it.' Then the question was asked, 'Which one are you? God will send the rain when He is ready. You need to prepare your field to receive it.'"

All summer we've been talking about gardening. And now we're into the fall, and we desperately need rain. Our lawns are brown; flowers and vegetables have not reached their full potential. Even some shrubs and trees are suffering from lack of water. We are in

a severe drought and the rain that is so desperately needed has not been forthcoming. What are we to do? One thing's for sure: We can't make it rain. We like to think of ourselves as resourceful and self-sufficient; as intelligent and innovative. But there is nothing we can do about the weather. It is what it is, and all we can do is to pray that we will, sooner rather than later, have rain; and that when that rain comes it won't be a monsoon or a hurricane.

As we talked about gardening this summer we were, of course, speaking of our lives as being our garden. So I will now ask you: Are you perhaps feeling overwhelmed, fatigued, drained, disappointed, depressed, burdened, or maybe even bored? Do you sometimes feel hard-pressed to get out of bed in the morning? Are you over-worked? Do you find yourself binging on food or video games or TV shows? Does life seem to not be measuring up to your expectations? If so, it may just be that your focus is on the wrong thing. It may just be that you have put God on a back burner and are plugging along on your own steam. It may just be that you have ceased to expect great things from God. But whatever it is, it could be that your garden, the garden of your life, is suffering from drought and desperately needs rain.

My Dad taught me that one way to prepare for rain is to keep the surface of the soil watered so that when it does rain it will sink in deep to where it is needed. At some point I had bemoaned the fact that I had "wasted" my time and my water watering my garden only to have it rain. And my dad said, "No, that's good. That way the rain will not run off, but will sink in."

Now, before we talk about how we keep our soil well-watered so that the rain can sink in, we need to ask, just what is this rain that we need so desperately but that we may not be experiencing? What is this rain that can raise our drooping spirits, restore our wilted hopes and dreams, cause us to grow and to bloom? I submit to you that it is the blessing of God in our lives. It is the grace and the mercy of God; it is His presence. It is the outpouring of His Holy Spirit. And it is the understanding and the conviction of the presence of His Holy Spirit within us giving us the power and the strength that we so desperately need to live our lives in a fallen world.

The background for our scripture passage from Deuteronomy is the farewell address of Moses to the Israelites as he prepares to transfer his leadership to Joshua and to prepare the people to finally enter the Promised Land. He was reminding them of all the laws that God had given them and he was urging them to obey those laws and to honor all God's claims on them as the people he redeemed from Egyptian bondage. And he was doing so because God had made it very plain that obedience to His laws was the key to the Israelites receiving His future blessing.

Now, you could argue that that these laws don't apply to us; that they have been superseded by Jesus. But Jesus Himself, when asked by one of the Pharisees, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and

the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” And at another time Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” So we can see that nothing has changed. The greatest commandment that God has given to us is to love and serve Him with all our heart and soul; and He has promised that if we will do so He will provide the rain needed for our gardens to grow. He will provide the rain needed for His garden to grow. He will shower us with His blessing.

Our God is always with us; indeed, He has promised to never leave or forsake us. However, we can leave and forsake Him, sometimes without even being aware. And I think perhaps the reason we can sometimes slip away from God is that He can be so slow in bringing about changes in our lives. From our perspective He can take forever to answer our prayers. And we can begin to drift. However, there is a very telling passage in Lamentations that reminds us of this fact and of our need to stay close to the Lord. Lamentations 3:24 and following reads, “My soul claims the Lord as my inheritance; therefore I will hope in him. The Lord is wonderfully good to those who wait for him, to those who seek for him. It is good both to hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”

But our waiting need not be passive. Quietly does not mean passively; rather it means without anxiety. So we can prepare while we wait in expectation for what God is going to do. And we are waiting with expectation because we have faith that God has not abandoned us. Therefore, we can take heart from the Apostle Peter’s admonition as given

to us in 1 Peter 5:6-7: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

So – with all of that said – how do we prepare for this rain? How do we keep our soil and our souls well-watered so that the rain of God’s blessing: His love, His mercy, His presence, His providence, and the outpouring of His Holy Spirit can sink in?

Our first clue comes from our scripture passage from Paul’s letter to Philemon. Almost as an after thought the Apostle Paul adds, Oh! By the way! “...one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.” Paul is asking his friend Philemon to plan ahead for a visit from him. He does not tell Philemon when he might be coming or even if he is definitely coming. He says that he is hoping to come as an answer to Philemon’s prayers. From this small passage we can easily see that the prayer of his friend had a large part in determining Paul’s plans. This was to be no casual, random visit. It would be a visit in response to prayer. And Paul is saying that he “hopes” to make the visit; although it does not appear to be a sure thing. Nevertheless, he is telling Philemon to get the guest room ready. In other words, prepare for rain.

This helps us to see that prayer is crucial in our preparation for God’s blessing. Now this is not to say that God will not bless us if we do not pray, or that He won’t bless others who do not pray. For, in Matthew 5 Jesus tells us that the Father “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” God loves everyone without distinction. However the blessings we are talking about today are spiritual

blessings. To re-iterate, these blessings are the grace and the mercy of God; the presence of God; the outpouring of His Holy Spirit; and the understanding and the conviction of His presence. And because part of the work of prayer is to change us and to bring us into line with the will of God for our lives, prayer is the beginning of the softening of our ground to receive the rain.

Reading the Word is also crucial for soil and soul preparation. How can we know God's will if we do not know what He says in His Word? How can we know the directions that God would have us take if we don't know how He feels about His Creation? How can we know what God expects of His Church if we haven't bothered to find out? As scripture tells us in Psalm 119, "Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path." Even a cursory reading of the Gospels will reveal God's will for His Church. For, the Gospels tell us what Jesus did while he walked upon this earth.

As we are told in Matthew 4, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them." And in Matthew 9 we read, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'"

Then, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.” From these three fairly brief scriptures we can see that Jesus expects His Church to reach out to the lost – to those who are like sheep without a shepherd – to bring them the Good News of the Gospel and to offer them the healing and deliverance of God. But how would we know that if we don’t read his Word? And how can we teach others what we ourselves do not know? And these are only three small scriptures! Think of how many, many more nuggets of truth are embedded in the scriptures just waiting to bring light to our paths and to our minds.

Prayer and reading the Word are the foundational spiritual disciplines that we need to undertake to prepare for rain. And there are other spiritual disciplines that we could talk about as well. However, I would like to mention just one more today; and this one will come about when we practice the first two. And that is, cultivating peace; that peace that Jesus promised us: the peace that passes all understanding; the peace that the world cannot give or take away. And that could conceivably be the hardest of the three to cultivate. For, there certainly is no peace to be found in the world today. In fact, I can’t think of a time in my life when there has been less peace. And not only is there less peace, chaos is becoming more and more pronounced. So how can we cultivate peace in such a scary, detrimental and negative environment?

We cultivate peace by choosing to trust God; by choosing to believe that He hears and

He answers our prayers. Isaiah 26:3 tells us, “You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you.” We cultivate peace by choosing to believe God’s promises as found in His Word. We cultivate peace by choosing to turn our lives over to God and to give Him the opportunity to use us for His purposes in the way that He desires. For, when we cease striving and trying to figure everything out on our own; when we cease trying to live a life that may be hard in our own strength, we will have placed ourselves in the position to be able to experience that peace that Jesus talks about. And when we have done that, along with engaging in prayer and reading the Word, we will have watered the surface of our garden well and we will be in a position to receive the life-giving rain when it comes.

And I would point out to you that all of this requires an act of the will. We have to choose. Every day. And this is pointed out in another admonition from Moses to the Israelites in his farewell address, as found in Deuteronomy 30, “This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life...”

We’ve been talking about our individual, personal lives. But now I would like to turn to the church. How will the results of our individual attempts to prepare the ground for rain benefit the church? I suggest that the benefit will come in obedience to God’s command that we love and serve Him with all our heart and soul. It will come in a renewed outpouring of prayer on behalf of our church. It will be seen in a renewed interest in our coming together

to study His Word. It will be seen in a rising up of expectation and conviction that God indeed does have a purpose for us; a vision; beyond what we have as yet discerned.

There will be a growing conviction that, regardless of how busy our lives may be, there is some gift that God wants us to use and to share in the life of His church. And as a church body we will grow in the expectation that God will continue to bring in people to join us as He has been slowly doing.

In some ways we are already preparing for the rain of God's blessing. Our new praise team is awesome and they will be joining us more often in the future, adding a new dimension to our worship. We are hoping to start up our Sunday School again. And, in preparation, we are going to repaint the nursery. Janet Borden is preparing pictures for the walls and we are all going to have the opportunity to be a part of this artistic project, if we wish. Nothing has been figured out or decided yet, but we are preparing for rain. We are preparing for children for our Sunday School.

Continued preparation will be measured in our commitment to love and serve the Lord to the best of our ability in our personal lives and here in our church. We are living in desperate times and the church needs to be doing what Jesus did: having compassion for the lost, bringing the love of God to those who are desperate, and offering a safe haven for people to receive God's comfort and His healing. Love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and soul. And expect that He will send the rain.

Let Us Pray: Gracious God, we thank You for Your Word that tells us so plainly how You

wish us to relate to You and to one another. Thank You for the promised rain of Your blessing. Grant to each one of us the desire and the ability to turn our lives over into Your care and to be present to You in the way that You wish so that Your purposes for this world may be carried out. And help us here in the church to understand and to do whatever is needed to be prepared so that we will be in a position to receive whatever it is that You have for us in Your time. In Jesus' name. Amen.