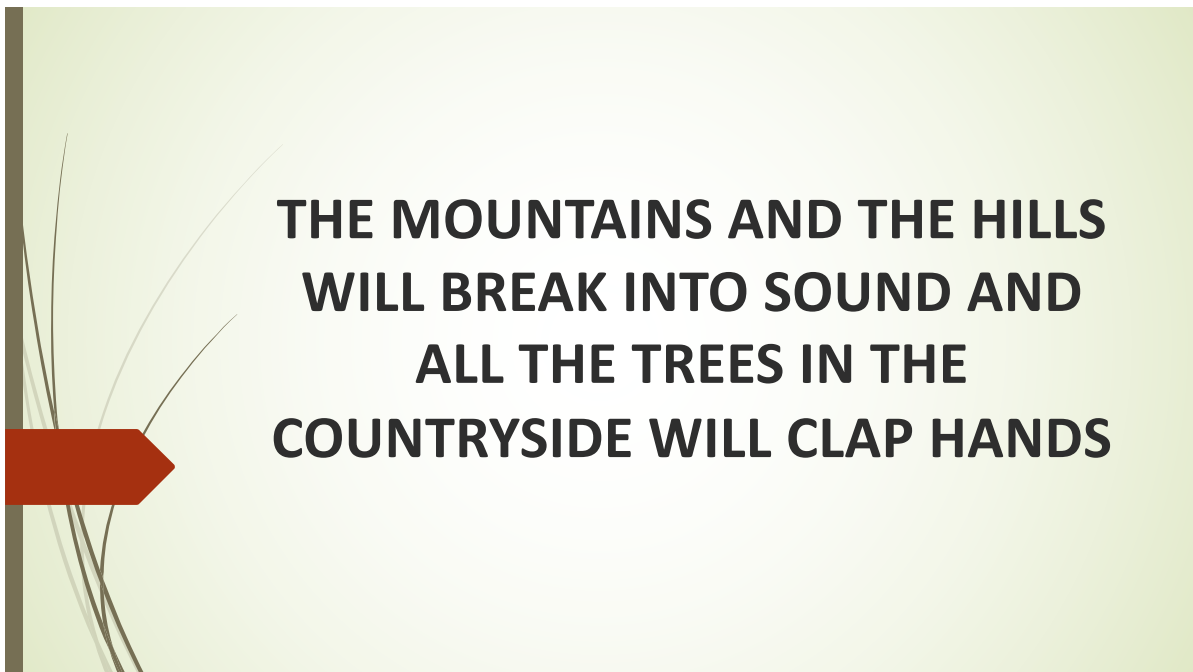


Sunday 1st October 2023 at 9.00 am and 10.30 am

THE MOUNTAINS AND THE HILLS WILL BREAK INTO SOUND AND ALL THE TREES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE WILL CLAP HANDS

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell
Presbyterian Church



READINGS:

Isaiah 55:10-13

**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,
11 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.**

**12 You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.**

**13 Instead of the thornbush will grow the
juniper,**

and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the Lord's renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure forever.”

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

**55 “Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”**

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

Luke 6:46-49

The Wise and Foolish Builders

46 “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say? 47 As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. 48 They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the

torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. 49 But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed, and its destruction was complete.”

SENTENCE FOR THE DAY

My word shall not return to me empty,’ says the Lord, ‘but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.’ Isaiah 55:11

INTRODUCTION



In 1945, a newsman Clarence W. Hall was attached to the American forces in Okinawa.

While he was there, he and his jeep driver visited various communities on the island. One of those villages was distinctively different than the others.

Hall wrote, “We had seen other Okinawan villages. They were down at the heels and despairing, but by contrast, this one shone like a diamond in a dung heap. Everywhere, we were greeted by smiles and dignified bows.

Proudly, the old men showed us their spotless homes, their terraced fields, their storehouses and granaries, and their prized sugar mill.”

Mr. Hall said he saw no jails and no drunkenness, and that divorce was unknown in this village. So, he began to ask around trying to discover why this village was different than others. He was told that an American missionary had come there some 30 years earlier. While the missionary was in the village, he had led two elderly townspeople to Jesus Christ, and he left them with a Japanese Bible.

These new believers studied the Scriptures and started leading their fellow villagers to Jesus.

The newsman’s driver said he was amazed at the difference between this village and the others around it. He remarked, “So this is

what comes out of only a Bible and a couple of old guys who wanted to live like Jesus.”

Isaiah said, “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. 12 You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace.”¹

Perhaps no passage in the Old Testament better expresses the love of God and the power of God’s word than Isaiah chapter 55, which begins with the oft-quoted words, “Listen up! Everyone who thirsts” (v. 1).

It continues with a number of powerful imperatives ... such as “come,” “buy,” “eat,” “listen,” “seek,” and “call” ... and they are used to outline God’s plan of salvation for every thirsty person (vv. 1–7).

¹ Mattoon, R. (2015). [Treasures from Isaiah](#) (Vol. 3, pp. 123–126). Rod Mattoon.

Affirmations of “mercy,” “pardon,” “joy,” and “singing” then seal the invitation.

So, we should notice several things from this wonderful chapter of Isaiah 55.



An Open Invitation

FIRSTLY, THERE IS AN OPEN INVITATION

The Servant, who is the subject of Isaiah, was told that his role in bringing salvation to Israel was “too small a thing for him” (49:6).

In fact, God commissioned the Servant for the larger role ... and ultimate mission ... of being the “light to the Gentiles” and to bring salvation “to the ends of the earth” (49:6).

“Listen up! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters,” in these words, we also hear the echoes of Jesus’ own invitation, **“Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).**

In each of these ... there is an open invitation, the call is universal, salvation is free, and the results are satisfying.

Universal Call

A Free Gift



SECONDLY, THERE IS A UNIVERSAL CALL

You will appreciate I am sure that for Israel, it may not have been easy to invite foreigners or Gentiles to join them in the kingdom of God.

As the chosen people of God, they had developed a distinctive identity that tied their ethnicity with their faith.

To be a Jew referred to both race and religion.

And, throughout their history, God had commanded them to keep their ethnic origins and their religious worship pure.

So, intermarriage and idolatry were contaminants to be avoided at all costs.

The purpose for these commandments, however, went beyond ethnic and religious purity as an end in itself.

God wanted to keep his people pure so that they could fulfil their chosen servant role of being the light to the Gentiles and bring the message of redemption to all nations.

You see, they could sin at either extreme.

On the one hand, if they failed to remain pure ... in race and undefiled in religion ... God could not use them ... as his holy instrument for the message of salvation.

But if they became ... so exclusive in race and so restrictive in religion ... God would have to find a new Servant for the fulfilment of His purpose.

And, sadly, Israel sinned on both counts.

During Isaiah's time, the nation rebelled against God: they intermarried with those from outside Israel, and mixed idolatry into its religious worship.

And, later, in Jesus' time, Israel sinned by assuming that they were exclusively chosen ... by God ... for salvation ... and created a religious system ... based upon regulations rather than faith.

Sadly, today they are not alone.

The church can also be tempted to sin on one side or the other. The church can fail to remain

faithful and can become restrictive in its understanding of divine grace.

Contamination by the world and isolation from the world are like ... magnetic poles ... that have the power of attraction in every generation.

For example, can you think of countries ... or situations ... where the church formed a close identification with parties on the political left ... or indeed ... on the political right?

... and in the process compromised the party-political independence of the church ... and it can be argued ... therefore, contaminated the Gospel.

And as political power changed ... the church consequently retreated into political isolation ... as the centre of political power shifted.

So, there can be a swing from contamination ... to isolation.

For example, the established church in England ... the Church of England ... is closely aligned with British political power ... and with cultural change ... it is becoming marooned in a spiritual island of decreasing size ... as tides of secularization and multifaith sweep over British society.

So, how can we avoid ... contamination by the world and isolation from the world.

I believe the biblical vision is grand and compelling ... Isaiah ... and Jesus ... leave no doubt that God's purpose is to build a kingdom of righteousness ... that is inclusive of Jews and Gentiles ... chosen children and foreigners ... neighbours and strangers.

The Lord's ultimate purpose is to bring all races, ages, genders, and ethnic origins ... from every corner of the earth ... together ... in a spiritual

body ... created exclusively ... by trust in God ...
and faith in Christ.

So, **“Listen up! Everyone who thirsts”** is the call of God ... to participate in the blessings of salvation ... provided exclusively by the Servant of the Lord ... whom we identify in the New Testament as Jesus Christ.

THIRDLY, WE NOTICE IT IS A FREE GIFT

Equal to the marvel of the universal call is the mind-boggling thought that salvation is free.

The analogy of the spiritually thirsty people is advanced to the truth that salvation is something that money cannot buy.

And again, we find ourselves poised between two extremes.

On the one hand, sometimes we overbalance the scriptural teaching, **“Work out your own**

salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12)

...

and try to create a religious system of belief that will earn us our salvation.

For example, indulgences in pre-reformation times, purgatory, tithing, being kind to granny and the cat, good works, attending the eucharist, obeying the teaching of the church, and so on ... these can become religious systems to earn salvation.

Or, on the other hand, we make salvation so free ... that we say that everyone will be saved ... whether or not they have faith in God ... or believe in Jesus Christ.

Now, I remember the shock when writing a multimedia training manual for the British Army on bereavement and grief and ...

discovering that the chaplains' department could not agree on a basic statement of life beyond the grave.

On the one hand, there was the traditional credal view of judgement ... where, using Jesus word's ... a division will be made between sheep and goats ... with the sheep going to heaven ... and the goats going to destruction or hell.

And on the other hand, for some chaplains, a view where everyone was either saved ... so it didn't matter what one believed eternally ... or there is no such thing as eternal life anyhow.

But Isaiah makes no mistake about the meaning of the free gift of salvation.

Salvation is free, it is a gift. And it is real. Jesus, who, as I have already mentioned that we identify as the Servant of Isaiah, is very clear about life beyond the grave and judgement to come.

But like every gift ... we need to receive it ... not just look at it ... or know about it ... or talk about it ... but accept it by faith and repentance ... before it is ours.

The invitation to “come to the waters,” includes those who “have no money” and excludes those who thought that they could buy the “wine and milk” of abundant life or barter for their benefits.

With an insight into revelation ... far ahead of his time ... Isaiah foresees the fact ... that the price of salvation ... for all people ... will be paid ... by the Suffering Servant – whom we know to be Jesus Christ, and his atoning death on the cross.



A Satisfying Life

FOURTHLY, WE NOTICE IT WILL BRING A SATISFYING LIFE

So, what would that look like for us today I wonder?

Now the power of God's word was seen in the true story of the H.M.S Bounty.

The Bounty was a British ship commanded by Captain Bligh and their mission was to plant various trees (fruit bearing and food bearing) on islands in the Pacific so that other ships

would be able to resupply themselves while sailing through that area.

They spent 6 months on Tahiti, and while they were there, the sailors got very friendly with the native population.... particularly the beautiful women of the island.

So, when the time came that Captain Bligh was ready to leave, the crew wasn't. They were enjoying their adventures with the island women.

The crew staged a mutiny and put Captain Bligh and others adrift in a lifeboat.

After a long journey, he was miraculously rescued and returned with more British ships, which captured 14 of the mutineers. They did not, however, capture the nine sailors who set sail to Pitcairn Island along with several native Tahitian men and women.

One of these sailors began distilling alcohol and the little colony deteriorated into one long drunken sex party. In time, all the mutineers from the ship died from disease or murder. All died except one, John Adams (also known as Alexander Smith).

Adams found himself alone with a group of women and children and with nothing to do.

He began searching through the footlockers of the other sailors and came across a Bible.

The Bible was new to him. He had never read it before in his life. So, he sat down and began to read.

He was so excited by what he read, that he began to teach the women and children from the Bible. It was 20 years before another ship—the USS Topaz, found that island.

When they finally arrived, what the crew of the Topaz found on Pitcairn Island was literally a miniature Utopia.

The people were living in decency, prosperity, harmony, and peace. There was nothing of crime, disease, immorality, insanity, or illiteracy.

How could this be? How was it accomplished?

The answer is somebody read, believed, and lived by the Bible, the Word of God. The people put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.²

A natural question follows for Isaiah, “Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?”

² Mattoon, R. (2015). [*Treasures from Isaiah*](#) (Vol. 3, pp. 123–126). Rod Mattoon.

You know, to live abundantly is one thing; to live satisfied and to be content is quite another.

Isaiah 55 speaks to us today **“Let your soul delight itself in the abundance”** of the gift of salvation, not in the things that money can buy.

So, how false is the bumper sticker that reads, **“He who dies with the most toys, wins!”**



FIFTHLY, WE NOTICE IT IS A ROYAL COVENANT

I am sure literalists in Israel ... would have been insulted ... by the thought that God would include Gentiles ... in the everlasting covenant ... that God had made with David ... the revered king of Judah ... who was the prototype of the Messiah.

Yet, Isaiah informs ... all who are thirsty ... and turn to God ... they will receive the “sure mercies” that God had shown to David.

They will be **“a witness to the people”** ... as David led and commanded his people ... and they will find unknown nations being influenced by them ... as was David’s kingdom.

As the royal seed of David ... will produce the Messiah ... so all those who trust in Christ will become members of the **“royal priesthood,”** as Peter called the people of God (1 Pet. 2:9) and will have a global influence.

SIXTHLY, WE NOTICE AN URGENT IMPERATIVE

Now, I believe it is really important to realise the free gift of salvation does not eliminate all human initiative ... nor human response.

Urgency is noted in the imperative, **“Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon him while he is near” (v. 6).**

I have nearly been in tears ... when I have read and preached on this verse.

“Call upon Him while He is near” means there are times when God is not near.

Preachers' come ... and preachers go. Churches open ... and churches close.

And although everyone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness ... receives the invitation to salvation ... the Lord expects the courtesy of an RSVP ... a human response.

Otherwise, the invitation is like the wedding announcement that came to a home and got lost in the shuffle of papers.

Weeks later it was found. “Oh no,” the person exclaimed, “we missed it!”

God’s invitation to salvation ... is both timely and timeless.

While the Lord invites us again and again ... there are golden moments of readiness ... when God is especially near ... and easily found.

And Isaiah implies there are times when he is not.

You see ... the promptings of the Spirit ... lead us to those golden moments.

And ... as I have preached previously ...
repentance and faith are the human acts ... that
are required for salvation. That is our RSVP.

In the early part of Isaiah chapter 55 it says,

**6 Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.**

**7 Let the wicked forsake their ways
and the unrighteous their thoughts.**

**Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have
mercy on them,**

and to our God, for he will freely pardon.



A Promise Of Life And Contentment

**SEVENTHLY AND FINALLY, WE NOTICE
THE PROMISE OF LIFE AND
CONTENTMENT**

Isaiah 55:12-13

**“You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.**

**13 Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the Lord's renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure forever.”**

What a wonderful picture that is ... of a life touched by the grace of God.

So, please recall the two example I gave earlier – the small **Japanese village on Okinawa** and the **early settlement on Pitcairn Island**.

You know, someone has written,

**“I came to God as I was,
Weary, and worn, and sad;
I found in God a Resting-place,
And he has made me glad.”**

AMEN