

“It Shall Not Return to Me Empty.”

Isaiah 55:10-13

In 1996, some archeologists in China discovered a seed for a lotus flower in ruins dating around the year 700 A.D. They were very excited by this discovery. I am fascinated by the field of archeology, but the more I study it, the more I realize that archeologists are an odd breed of people. They are capable of getting very excited over finding a seed.

They were excited about discovering this lotus seed, but their excitement turned to amazement when after applying water, that 1300 year old seed sprouted and grew.

In our Gospel lesson, we hear Jesus compare the Word of God to seed sown in a field. Like that lotus seed, the Word of God can lie dormant for a long time, but as the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, “It shall not return to Me empty.”

This Biblical truth that the Word of God never returns empty, empowers pastors with confidence to keep preaching; it enables parents and Sunday School teachers to have patience with the children; it fills the laity of the church with courage, and instills missionaries with a vision of the future. God’s Word will never return empty. It is easy to become discouraged when we don’t see immediate results after sowing the seed of the Word.

Pastors can become discouraged when the pews are not full. Parents become discouraged when their children seem to be, shall we say, inconsistent in demonstrating a life of faith.

Like a seed, God's Word is living and active even when we can't yet see it at work. When you plant your garden, you can't dig up the seeds every other day to see if they are germinating or growing. You have to let it grow. You cannot impose your will or force growth to happen. Life only happens through the presence of God.

God's living Word has been planted in you. Through the waters of Baptism, life has sprouted forth in you. We gather here so that this new life is nurtured and cultivated. When we stay away from Christ's Word and His church, the thorns and weeds of this world are allowed to grow and the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth, as Jesus says, can choke it and make it unfruitful.

Once the life within the seed has sprouted forth and the plant begins to mature, the field needs to be cultivated so that the seed may grow. The life within you; the faith created at your Baptism through water and the Word – as it matures, further care is needed.

That is what we are doing here this evening/morning. A few weeks ago we heard Jesus say that He comes with a sword to cut

and divide. He cuts out that which is evil. He cuts out the weeds and the thorns of sin. In the Confession and Absolution, and in His own Body and Blood, He cultivates us; He strengthens us; He forgives us; and He changes the landscape of our lives.

We also need instruction and nurturing so that we are rooted in God's Word. Shallow faith is generally a short-lived faith. If faith has no root, it may spring up quickly, but if there is any trouble or persecution, as Jesus says, the person quickly falls away.

This is the danger of the modern trend in many churches to focus their ministry on that which is entertaining so as to draw people in, but not giving much concern to whether they are teaching sound doctrine. Many people today make the mistake of defining "success" in the church simply in statistical numbers. Growth occurs in the church when God's Word in its truth and purity penetrates the hearts of sinners and makes a real and lasting change.

The success of a farmer is not simply determined by the number of acres that get planted. You must have good seed. The weeds and all sorts of critters can do tremendous damage. The success of a field is only seen when it is harvested.

Unfortunately, there is no way to calculate or quantify the effectiveness of the mission of this church – or any church. Our

task is to simply remain faithful in planting good seed and trust our Lord that His Word “shall not return empty.”

We are blessed to be a part of a Confessional Lutheran church body where catechetical instruction takes place and doctrinal standards are upheld – even if what Scripture says is not popular with the modern world.

It is not through clever arguments that you have been convinced to come here this evening/ morning. It is because the seed of God’s Word has been planted in you by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit uses Word and Sacrament as His Means of Grace. We then carry what God has given us out to those whom He has placed in our path. The Gospel is disseminated in the world by the words and actions of ordinary people like you and me.

We speak God’s Word. Children are baptized. Christ’s Body and Blood are shared. God’s living and active Word is present in your hearts and in your mouths. God says, “It shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

It may take a long time for you to see the Word at work in those whom you love. Keep planting the seed. Tend to it. Nurture it. It shall not return empty. Amen.