“***It Shall Not Return to Me Empty***” by S. Finlan, for The First Church, July 12, 2020

**Isaiah 55:10–13**

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, 11 so 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.

12 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.

This passage says that God’s word goes forth and accomplishes what it was sent out to do. The main thing it is sent out to do is to create peace, growth, and joy. Fragrant trees like cypress and myrtle will bloom, instead of thorns and brier. In Hebrew tradition, myrtle stands for marriage. Cypress can stand for healing and life. Both are wonderfully fragrant. The Christian theologian Ephrem the Syrian says that the thorn and brier being overcome by the cypress and myrtle, stands for the fruitless customs of the nations being replaced by more gracious customs that spring up after the advent of Christ (from *Isaiah 40–66*, ed. Mark W. Elliott; Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT XI: 190). Whether or not we can assert that Isaiah knew about Christ, we *can* certainly see here a promise of God’s power and intention for life, restoration, and joy.

The author is Second Isaiah, the great prophet of the Babylonian exile who uttered hopeful words to the Jewish exiles living in captivity. The beginning of the chapter had spoken about wine and milk without price, and promised an everlasting covenant. That’s probably still in the author’s mind here, later in the chapter, where he proclaims the enduring love of God.

These words are sources of comfort, and just what we need. We need to be reminded of these promises, just as Second Isaiah’s audience did. Sometimes we get discouraged when we learn of bad things happening in the world. Maybe we think that more thorns than myrtles are growing in the world, but if we look to God, not to the world, there are more myrtles. This is a call to faith in God, not faith in the world. But God will *act* in the world; that is part of the promise.

So the test, for us, is: how will we respond to the promise? Do we accept the promise that God’s will is going to be accomplished, even when we cannot see it happening, except perhaps in our hearts and in a few lives of people we know? A scripture like this asks us to affirm our faith in the promise that God will do wonderful things for those who listen for God’s word and seek God’s will. It is asking us to reaffirm our faith in our hearts. Sometimes other Scriptures can help our comprehension. I like the line in today’s psalm, “the river of God is full of water” (Ps 65:9). Do we believe that God is full of good plans and intentions? Even in this difficult and often chaotic world, can we affirm the goodness and orderliness of God’s plans? When we affirm it, I think we help to latch onto it within our own character, and strengthen our grasp on our future spiritual life. This is a test of our values, and of the depth of our spiritual hope and aspiration.

We have to nurture our faith, and it will grow. God provides the sunlight and rain. We have to tend the garden: be faithful and patient. We are to cultivate the garden, to cultivate trust and receptivity to God. Trust that God will mold you and shape you as needed, and that it will be good for your self-respect and your strength of soul, although the growth may be slow, like a myrtle tree.

I return to Ephrem’s idea that the myrtle and cypress springing up stand for improved customs that come into society when Christ is accepted. Whether or not Isaiah knew about Christ and the aftermath to Christ, he certainly *did* have an instinct for the way God works, the way God intends to create a new and fragrant environment for people. The physical images are symbolic of spiritual realities.

The nature imagery in the passage is not meant to be taken literally, but indicates that, once we grasp the spiritual truth, the world will seem to be working along with us. The trees of the field will not *literally* clap their hands, but things in the universe will fall into place to help us on our way. Health and joy will become visible in our lives.

Everything fell into place for Vaclav Havel when, in 1989, it came time for Czech society to replace the communist government. Half a million people were demonstrating against the government. The Communist Party leadership decided to resign. Parliament took charge. They freed Havel and others from prison, organized elections, and elected Havel president. Havel later spoke to the U.S. Congress, and warned that the U.S. is suffering from “moral relativism . . . a frenzied consumerism, a lack of solidarity,” and that we need to rediscover the transcendental roots of “true goodness, true responsibility, true justice” (<https://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-8-number-5/living-responsibly-v%C3%A1clav-havels-view>). Everything quickly fell into place for Havel. The mountains and the hills burst into song, and he was given a platform for addressing the whole western world.

I am saying that God has a plan. He has begun a work in each one of us, and it will be completed. He has sent forth his word to accomplish something, and it will not return empty. God’s promises are not empty. There will be a spiritual blossoming, and it will be “for an everlasting sign” (55:13).

Let us reflect upon our lives. In the long run, will our lives testify to our having invested our hope in God? There’s a song that asks, “Who’s going to make it? We’ll find out, in the long run.” What’s the long-run message about our life? Does it show evidence of faith? Does it have the fragrance of myrtle and cypress?

May your path to God be blessed with spiritual fragrance all along the way.