### “It Shall Accomplish” Steve Finlan for The First Church, March 23, 2025

**Isaiah 55:6–11**

6 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. 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

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.

**Luke 13:1–5**

1At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Welcome to everyone on this beautiful Sunday. We come to church for God, and we come to church for each other, for fellowship. Obviously there is a huge difference between God and mere humans, and a part of the message in Isaiah 55 is about how highly transcendent God is. He is as high above us as the heavens are above the earth. He is infinite and he is spirit, while we are finite and material, even though we are spirit-indwelt. But I think the author’s main point is the next one: that God has a purpose for what he does, and that his purpose will always be accomplished. Like water circulates between the earth and the sky, germinating crops on earth, so God’s Word circulates in the world and returns, having accomplished what it intended. Seeding the earth is part of that purpose, but it implies that there are other purposes accomplished, too. There is order and meaning in the universe because God has intentions and plans and he sees to it that they get accomplished. We can trust and have faith that God’s plan is in action and will be done.

The question of accidents and natural disasters complicates this point, and it is just that question that Jesus raises, knowing what is on peoples’ minds, when they raise the issue of an atrocity that Pilate committed. Jesus makes it clear these Galileans were not any worse than anybody else. Further, he mentions the people who were killed when a tower collapsed. They were not any guiltier than anybody else, he says (Luke 13:4–5). None of those people deserved what happened to them. There was a belief that you “got what you deserved” in life, so if someone was ill or injured, then it was retribution for some sin; that God caused it to happen. But no!— There *is* such a thing as injustice, and there is such a thing as a tragic accident. There is undeserved tragedy and suffering.

So, it’s not right to rationalize all tragedies so as to find a way to say “they deserved it.” That’s a cop-out, and it’s grossly unfair. There may be some cases where people have brought disaster upon themselves, but we can’t lazily ascribe all disaster to God’s supposed vengeance.

We might be all-too-quick to say “it’s God’s will” about everything that happens. But there is plenty that happens that is not God’s will. In the interval of time between creation and that day when God’s will is truly done on earth as it is in heaven, there is plenty that is not God’s will that transpires in the material world. Accidents and injustices do happen.

We do our best to anticipate accidents and to prepare for hurricanes and such events, but we also need to curtail the violence and oppression that are common on earth. That is a harder task, because it involves changing the human heart. But we have our guidelines from the Bible. Zechariah writes “do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor” (7:10), and again “Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord” (8:16–17).

I imagine these are some of the things that God’s word intends as it goes out from his mouth, circulating in the world and accomplishing what it intends. Unfortunately, there is a time lag in that accomplishment, and we humans often put a drag upon that circulation of goodness, slowing it down. But good will eventually triumph. As it says in Third Isaiah, in the material immediately following the passage we quoted at the beginning, “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” (Isa 55:12), and then “maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come” (56:1).

These are the things God desires: justice, peace, fairness, rightness. God is good. Let us do our part. But in the times in which we live, there will be injustice, unfairness, and war. We seek to change people’s hearts, so that they are not inclined in that direction. But external pressure can only do so much; it is the internal pressure of a changed heart that can do everything that is needed. “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” the Apostle Paul wrote, “so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Rom 12:2). With a transformed mind, we will know how to do good. That transformation is an essential part of the gospel’s effect upon us.

The composer George Frideric Handel contributed much to our appreciation of the beauty and truth of the gospel. This German-born composer had a fairly successful career in England, writing in English, including the great Lenten and Easter work, “The Messiah.” But he was roundly condemned in his own time by many ministers, even by Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, who thought it inappropriate to have religious works performed in common theaters, and who thought he appealed too much to people’s desire for enjoyment. Yet many disagreed with this somber religious opinion, and saw no problem with religious music that was enjoyable. Handel was approaching his death in Lent of 1759, and hoped he would die on Good Friday, “in hopes of meeting his good God, his sweet Lord and Savior, on the day of his Resurrection” (doctrine.org/handels-messiah). He actually died on Holy Saturday of that week.

God’s plan of salvation, and his plan to raise us from the dead were always a part of Handel’s music. Among the many Scriptures he set to music in “The Messiah” was Paul’s “I tell you a secret: We shall not all sleep; but we shall all be changed” (1 Cor 15:51), and “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31).

Today’s sermon had to do with faith in God’s purposes, the fact that not everything that happens is God’s will, that we should render just judgments, that we should allow our minds to be transformed, that we can appreciate beauty, and that there is an afterlife hope for us. There is something enduring in goodness and justice and beauty, and if we hitch our wagon to things that endure, then we will endure.