

Isaiah 55:10-11

Psalms 65

Romans 8:18-23

Matthew 13:1-23

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I want you to know that I have waited a long time for the opportunity to preach on the readings that we have just heard. Not long after my ordination some seventeen years ago, I began thinking about how my life experiences are reflected in these readings. The Gospel and the responsorial psalm remind us that seed sown in good soil will yield an abundant harvest. And in the first reading, the prophet Isaiah reflects on rain and snow watering the earth, making the soil fertile, and enabling the abundant harvest. Growing up on a Texas dry-land farm, I learned those lessons early. In the second reading, Saint Paul writes to the Romans that creation is subject to corruption, "groaning in labor pains," and longing to be set free. Paul urges care for all of creation, including the earth, our common home. Good farmers know that they must care for the earth, protecting the soil from depletion, erosion, and pollution, if it is to remain fertile over the long term. It took me a while to learn that lesson, but I finally got it. With my farm background as well as an engineering career working with water and the environment, I began my diaconate itching to preach on these readings. But that was not going to happen for quite some time. We hear these readings only on the fifteenth Sunday in ordinary time, and only in cycle A, which comes around every third year. In all these years, my weekend to preach has not fallen on that Sunday until now.

So here we are, the fifteenth Sunday in ordinary time, cycle A, and this homily has

turned out somewhat different from what I had expected that it would. The readings, of course, are not at all about agriculture and hydrology. Both Isaiah and Jesus are using seed as a metaphor for the word of God. Jesus makes that quite clear in the third part of the Gospel where he explains his parable of the sower. The seed sown on the path, Jesus says, is about one who hears the word but does not understand it. The seed sown on rocky ground is about one who hears the word and receives it with joy but then falls away in difficult times. The seed sown among thorns is about one who hears the word but then surrenders to worldly anxieties and the lure of riches. And finally, the seed sown on rich soil is about one who hears the word, understands it, acts on it, and produces much fruit. Upon hearing that parable, we may be tempted to use it to label others according to how we might perceive them accepting and acting on the word of God. Those who measure up, in our opinion, are like rich soil. But those who do not measure up for whatever reasons are like hard paths, rocky ground, or thorns. That, however, is not where Jesus is going with this parable. Rather than judging others, we should use the parable for introspection, to judge our own actions. I need to own up to the fact that there are times in my life when I am like that hard path, doing my own thing and not even trying to know and to follow God's will. There are times when I am like rocky ground, starting out with good intentions, but giving up when the going gets tough. There are times when I am like a briar of thorns, letting fear or greed choke out an opportunity to do good. But then, I also need to appreciate that I can be like rich soil as well, producing much fruit, and helping to build the kingdom of God. Even rich soil, as Isaiah wrote, must be nurtured and watered to keep it fertile. So it is with the word of God. Nurtured by

prayer, and watered with love, compassion, and forgiveness, God's word yields great abundance, "a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold," Jesus says.

When Saint Paul wrote in today's second reading about creation "groaning in labor pains" he was using the image of a woman giving birth to portray mass suffering. That imagery is used throughout Holy Scripture to describe difficult times that would eventually end, but only after much pain. Jeremiah wrote that the suffering of the people of Judah was like a woman crying out in labor. Isaiah described suffering in the city of Babylon as a woman experiencing the anguish of labor. Similar language can also be found in the Gospels of Mark and John. But John also highlights the joy that comes after the struggle ends. Like John, Paul's letter calls for hope in time of pain. Paul sees suffering as part of the human condition, which he connects back to the sin of Adam. But he also anticipates future glory through the Holy Spirit. We are all painfully aware of suffering in our time. Many of our neighbors suffer the cruelties of racism, that persistent remnant of slavery, our nation's original sin. People all over the world continue to suffer and die from the devastating COVID-19 pandemic. And the earth itself suffers from decades of environmental abuse. As we work and pray to end these sufferings, let us listen to Paul and have hope in our time of pain. Let us also listen to the words of Jesus in the Gospel, keep our soil rich and fertile, so we might all contribute to a fruitful bounty, "a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold."