

Did you check the temperature this morning when you woke up? If it was anything like me, I woke up and discovered that it was 20 below. We won't even talk about the wind chill. So that made me curious. I had to see what the rest of the week was going to look like. So I opened up the forecast and discovered that this week isn't going to be any better. Winter, it seems, has come. And I know a lot of you are not very fond of winter. I get it. I understand why. After all, it's not a whole lot of fun to deal with snow. It's not a whole lot of fun to deal with ice or wind or bad roads. And when winter last some years from October all the way to April, you get pretty tired of it. You just want it to be over. Wondering is there a point to this? Why do we have to deal with this for so long? But Christians, we know--even if we don't always like to admit it--that winter does serve a good purpose. After all, this snow and ice which we struggle with right now will melt in the spring. And when it melts, it will give our crops the water which they need to be able to thrive so that we have a good harvest. And there's even some crops, like winter wheat, that need this hard freeze in order to thrive. Without it, they wouldn't be anything nearly the same. So winter serves a good purpose, even if on a day like today we can't always see how.

And Christians, God tells us in our Old Testament reading for today that his Word is much the same way. God says, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 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 shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." In other words, God tells us, his Word comes to us for a reason, and it never returns void. We are not just dealing with it as if it was just empty. But God gives it to benefit us, because God is a God of his word. Even when we seem to be going through a winter without end, God's Word will come to a spring when he will keep his promises just as he has said.

That was a message which Israel needed to hear in our Old Testament reading for today. Because Isaiah lived during a time when the northern kingdom of Israel had been taken away because of their sins and the southern kingdom was also under attack. And I can only imagine all of those faithful Israelites, those who still believed in the Lord, were wondering: why is this happening? Why does it seem like God has gone back on his promises? Why does it seem like we're stuck in a winter without end? Didn't God tell us that he would do all of these things for us? But where is he now?

Because God a thousand years earlier promised to Abraham that he would have many descendants and that he would cause them to dwell in that land. And he renewed that promise to his son Isaac and to his grandson Jacob, that God would do these things for his people. And then 400 years after that, God kept his promise when he used Moses to bring Israel out of Egypt into the promised land, using Joshua to capture that land and to make it Israel's inheritance forever. And 400 years after that, God used David and his son Solomon to expand that kingdom, so that it seemed like everything was going exactly as God said that it would. But then the kingdom divided. And Israel fell further and further into sin. And the further and further they fell, the more God warned and threatened them that they would be taken away. And that's exactly what happened. The northern kingdom of Israel was now gone, and the southern kingdom of Judah was wondering what the future would hold. But what had happened to God's promise to Abraham all those years ago? Why did it seem like the Word of God had come to nothing? And

if God's Word had come to nothing, I'm sure they thought in their hearts: what's the point of all of this? Why should I follow after God, if God's not even going to do what he said he would do?

But he told his people, Christians, that he is a God who keeps his word. His Word cannot be broken. His Word is a word which will come to pass no matter what. And even if they couldn't see it right then and there, that did not mean that his Word had failed. This is why he compares his Word to rain and to snow. Because if you think of rain and snow all by themselves without thinking of anything else, you would think that they were doing nothing too. Rain, after all, comes down from heaven, goes into the ground, and disappears. If we didn't think about the future, we might think, what was the point of that? What good did that do? Kind of like a child who plants a seed and waters it and then wonders, why isn't it growing? Shouldn't it be doing something? Shouldn't it be coming along? It doesn't seem to be doing anything at all. And then also with the snow that's outside on the ground right now, if we were only thinking about today, we'd be pretty hard-pressed to find a good use for it. Because it's just causing all kinds of problems. But that snow has a purpose. It will give increase in the spring when it causes the plants to grow so that we will have a bountiful harvest. We can't look at just right now when it comes to these things. We have to look at what this thing has been sent to do.

And God says, "My Word has been sent for a good reason. It will not return unto me void. It will do what I want it to do, because I am the Lord who has promised these things." And God made a promise to his people that he would bring them back from their captivity. And he did it, because he is a God of his word. And God promised to his people that he would send them a Savior, a Savior for the whole world in his Son Jesus Christ. And he did it, because he is a God of his word. God's Word cannot be broken. God is faithful to every single one of his promises.

So Christians, when you are facing your own hard times, it can be very, very easy to wonder, what's the point of all of this? Where have God's promises gone? And when we are caught in the middle of that difficult time, it can be also very, very easy to wonder, what's the point of all of this? Why should I follow after God, if God is not even going to keep his Word? God has promised you peace, for example, in his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus himself says, "My peace I give to you. My peace I leave with you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." But then we see the turmoil which surrounds us--turmoil in our families, turmoil in our community, turmoil in our society, even turmoil within ourselves--and we might think, "Well, where is that peace that God has promised me? It doesn't seem like it's coming at all." And then, as we so often do when times are hard, we may be tempted to stop praying, because we think, "Well, what's the point? It doesn't really seem to have done anything up to now."

Christians, God has promised to you freedom, freedom from your sin, freedom from those things which held us away from God, freedom so that we can be a new creation. And maybe in our excitement, we push back against our sins and say: "This time I'm really gonna stop doing it!" But then two weeks later we find that the sin's back again. Maybe even stronger than before. And we wonder, what happened to the promise? What happened to that freedom which comes from God's Son? And maybe we would be tempted in that moment to stop fighting back against sin at all. Because what's the point, after all? It didn't do anything the last time.

Christians, God has promised to you victory, victory through his Son Jesus Christ, to whom all things have been given. Jesus has overcome the world. He will judge the world in righteousness. But then we see the evil in our world around us, how it seems to be growing stronger and stronger by the day. And we might wonder, "What happened to the promise? What happened to the reign of Christ?" And in that moment we may be tempted to say, "Well, why should I fight back against evil at all? I'm just one person. It's not going to make much of a difference after all."

Because that's what happens, Christians, when we're so focused on the moment and we forget what God's Word has come to do. We start to wander away from him, to not listen to what he wants us to do. But Christians, God's Word has not failed. God's Word will not fail. God is one who keeps his promises. And no matter what happens, that Word will come to pass. He is faithful. And if he kept all of his promises to his people, bringing them back from captivity and sending to them his Son, do you think that he is going to forget you? Do you think that he is not going to keep his Word? God is faithful. God will do what he says he will do. And for that reason, Christians, we can follow after him, trusting in him, doing what he wants us to do. Because it is not vain to serve God. God is faithful, and following after him will not be useless. God is going to do what he says he will do.

So don't be afraid, Christians. Follow after him. As God tells us right after our reading in Isaiah chapter 56, "Thus says the LORD: 'Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.'" Keep justice, Christians, and do what is righteous, because God's salvation is coming. God's righteousness will be revealed. And blessed indeed are you when you follow after him, because he is faithful to his Word. God will do what he says he will do, because he is a God who keeps his promises.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, your mercies are new every morning and great is your faithfulness. We pray that you would strengthen us always to trust in you, knowing that you are a God who keeps your Word and that you will keep every one of your promises through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.