

Listen, and Live

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON ISAIAH 55:1-3, 6-9 AND LUKE 13:1-9

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Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. (Isaiah 55:2-3)

MAYBE YOU LABOR FOR THINGS THAT DON'T SATISFY because you've given up on attaining the things that do. Maybe you have hungered so long for real satisfaction in life, without fulfillment, that you've settled for any junk-food life that will at least take the edge off your hunger and let you forget what you've really been waiting for. Maybe, like Abraham's father, Terah, the place or the condition of life for which God has destined you seems so far away as to be unreachable, and you settle down at some attractive oasis along the way and call it home, and you resign yourself to dying there, leaving the journey to someone else to complete (Gen. 11:31-32).

God's message to you is: Don't give up. Listen to what God has to say, and live, and be satisfied with the fullness of what God has promised. For, if we had read on in that chapter in Isaiah we would have heard God say:

"For as the rain and 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, 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." (Isa. 55:10-11)

Give the barren fig tree another chance. Let it stand for one more year, until its soil can be turned over and its roots fed (Luke 13:8). God is patient to wait until we bear the fruit God has appointed us to bear, fruit that will last (John 15:16). God doesn't think the way we think; God's ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8); and God's timing is not our timing, for a thousand years in God's sight are no more than a single day (Ps. 90:4). Don't give up. Never give up.

At the end of October 1941, when England had been through some of the darkest days of World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke to the students at Harrow School. Here's what he said.

You cannot tell from appearances how things will go. Sometimes imagination makes things out far worse than they are; yet without imagination not much can

be done. Those people who are imaginative see many more dangers than perhaps exist; certainly many more than will happen; but then they must also pray to be given that extra courage to carry this far-reaching imagination. But for everyone, surely, . . . this is the lesson: never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. . . . We stood all alone a year ago, and to many countries it seemed that our account was closed, we were finished. All this tradition of ours, our songs, our School history, this part of the history of this country, were gone and finished and liquidated. . . .

Very different is the mood today. Britain, other nations thought, had drawn a sponge across her slate. But instead our country stood in the gap. There was no flinching and no thought of giving in; and by what seemed almost a miracle to those outside these Islands, though we ourselves never doubted it, we now find ourselves in a position where I say that we can be sure that we have only to persevere to conquer.

We sometimes forget that this is also God's message. God has promised never to give up on us. Hebrew scriptures and Christian scriptures alike are a record of how God never, never, never, gave up.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God's very first rule. But God never gave up.

Abraham wandered, and Sarah laughed. But God never gave up.

Moses fled, and hid, and shook with fear. But God never gave up.

Saul went insane. But God never gave up.

David plotted against Uriah. But God never gave up.

Ahaz sold out to Assyria. But God never gave up.

Israel fell into pieces. But God never gave up.

The Jewish people became exiles. But God never gave up.

John the Baptist was beheaded. But God never gave up.

Peter denied he even knew Jesus. But God never gave up.

The disciples all ran away. But God never gave up.

Jesus was put to death and laid in a tomb. But God never gave up.

God never, never, never gave up and has not given up today! So we are able to sing with the prophet Habakkuk:

"Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit be on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights" (Hab. 3:17-19).