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 August 21, 2022- Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Scripture: Isaiah 58:9b-11 NRSV (11)
 Subject: "If"

Introduction: I love when I see conjunctions like "therefore" or "but" and in this case the word "IF" in scripture. Like "**But** they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, or "**Therefore** put on the full armor of God." Because these conjunctions offer us a way out, a possibility, a different consequence that hinges on not how good or bad we are, but on our response to God. And God tells Isaiah to say it, really to SHOUT it out loud and clear, that the Israelite's religious rituals mean nothing to God. That when they go through the MOTION of fasting, only to do the same exact same evils of idolatry, of oppression, of thievery, of lying, etc. when they SHOULD be repenting and turning away from their wicked ways and then TURNING back to God, that fasting means nothing to God.

Sort of like some of us do, during the season of Lent. We go through the MOTIONS of fasting and prayer for 40 days but NOTHING really changes. We are exactly the same arrogant, hard-headed, hard-hearted people at the end of Lent that we were when it started on Ash Wednesday.

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah uses the word "IF" several times. And the word, "IF" presents some choices for the people of God. It lays out some pre-requisites, or CONDITIONS set forth by God, because though we have experienced an extremely harsh, vengeful, yet JUST God through the prophets this summer, we are reminded in this passage above ALL else that our GOD is not just a God of love who wants to restore us, but God **IS** love.

Our God is a God who WANTS to bless us and not curse us, who WANTS to bring us JOY and not PAIN. To RESTORE us and not turn us away... **IF** we would allow it, **IF** we would lay down our pride, **IF** we would give up our addiction to white ideology, **IF** we would stop our violence toward one another, "**IF... MY people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land**". **Says 2Chronicles 7:14**

And the TRUTH is, the land that we live in, this land that we THINK we rule, that we THINK we own, that desperately needs to be HEALED in this nation and world, BELONGS to God. "The earth is the LORDS and FULLNESS thereof." EVERYTHING we have is because of God, everything that we are able to do in our lives, in our work, in our play, with our families EVEN with our foes is because of GOD. God owns it all! God just CHOOSES to share it with US.

God INTENTIONALLY put all of creation in this symbiotic, interdependent relationship with one other. ALL God's creation is connected. If you hurt ME, you are hurting yourself. If you harm anyone, harm will come to you. Because we DO know that we REAP what we sow, RIGHT? What we put out in the universe comes back on us, INCLUDING nature.

So, when we poison the water, we poison ourselves-- when we pollute the air, we jeopardize the health of our own lungs, AND our skin-----When we rape the land of trees, we reduce our oxygen and remove our protection from windstorms-- when we over-work the land, we adversely impact the food that WE need to eat to survive. AND if we harm the animals on the land, in the sea or in the air-- we harm ourselves as well...WE ARE ALL CONNECTED.

God has laid out these terms, these conditions that we have heard through the prophets all summer long. To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of the children, the widows, the earth, immigrants by choice OR by force, PAY folks for their labor... AND...IF we do these things God will 1. Guide Us, 2. God will Strengthen Us. 3. God will Satisfy Us

GOD WILL GUIDE US

Like wayward children we spend so many days, weeks, months and years of our lives trying to plan the outcome of our lives instead of yielding to the Lordship of GOD through Jesus Christ who when he ascended to heaven, promised to SEND the Holy Spirit who would "GUIDE us into all truth" (John 16:13)

Many of us are a part of a culture where we are expected to set goals for our life early in our youth, pursue an education, internship or apprenticeship aligned with those goals, network with folks in our area of interest, even marry accordingly.

And like most children, we don't want to be told what to do. So, we create this **illusion** that we are directing ourselves, we hold a spirit of "Invictus" where we tell ourselves, "We are the MASTERS of our fate, and the CAPTAIN of our souls", the determiners of our destiny. But the truth is, we don't determine ANYTHING, we cannot even BLINK without GOD.

ILLUSTRATION:

Have you ever thought about how many times you blink in one day? Some scientists believe blinking not only moisturizes our eyes, which if you wear contacts like me you TOTALLY get. But it helps us to experience a "WAKEFUL REST", a way to rest our eyes as we continue throughout our day. And according to the Joseph Stromburg in the December 12, 2012 issue of Smithsonian Magazine, the average person "blinks some 15-20 times per minute". That means most of us, if we take a conservative guess, blink 900 times an hour OR 21,600 times a day, just blinking. We CANNOT blink even ONE time without GOD... who created us.

So, it would be extremely arrogant of us, to even consider that we can do ANYTHING on our own. And what Isaiah is declaring is that **IF** we do the things God has purposed all of us to do which according to what we have heard from the prophets throughout the summer, it ALWAYS incorporates JUSTICE. IF we DO justice, not **talk** about it, not **read** about it, not **intellectualize** it, GOD will guide us. God will lead us, God will direct us, God will show us how to get from point A to point B. God will show us how to get out of some these situations we have backed OURSELVES into. God will show us how to get out of these one-way, toxic relationships we are in. God will show us how to NAVIGATE our mental and physical health, the health of our finances, our families. God will guide our decisions in ministry, and outreach, in community, in every aspect of our lives. "In ALL thy ways acknowledge GOD and GOD WILL direct our paths. (*Prov. 3.6*) Because, God **WILL Guide Us...** IF we allow God to guide us.

GOD WILL STRENGTHEN US

Verse 11 says God will "make our bones strong. The NIV translations says, God will "strengthen your frame." God gives us the endurance that we need for the next phase of our journey in life. Because we need strength to make it through. And no matter how weak and feeble we may FEEL, the psalmist declares "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the

strength of my heart and my portion forever," (*Psalm 73:26*) and we BUILD that strength, through deepening our relationship with God. To get God's strength, we have to walk toward God and AWAY from the things and the PEOPLE that weaken us. We have to work-out our soul salvation. We have to work-out our spiritual and physical muscles. And the more we work out, the stronger we become.

ILLUSTRATION:

Physically, I have inherited arthritis from my mother and her mother before her. There are days my bones feel weak. My knees and feet don't want to move right, my back hurts and now I have a finger that throbs like a toothache. And for the past few years, my bones were so weak and in so much pain that in less than 15 minutes I could not walk without limping.

But I decided that the only way I could strengthen my bones and my muscles was I had push past the pain and work my muscles. Like creation is connected- our body parts are also connected. So, strengthening my feet, strengthens my legs, which strengthens my hips, which strengthen my core and my back.

So, I started out in the pool, because it was the **easiest**, less painful way for me to work out. But as the summer heat ramped up, a heated pool was too much. Then I had to force myself to walk again for exercise. And at first, it was painful, so I started out slowly by just walking to the mailbox and back, then I extended it to the end of my street and back which is a mile, and now I am adding a side street to extend it a little more until I build up to three miles a day.

And since I have strengthened those muscles, the pain has dramatically reduced. It's not gone, and those who have arthritis KNOW, you will NEVER be completely pain-free, but it has diminished, and I can function. But I have to keep WALKING to maintain the strength of my bones and muscles. That's **physically**.

Spiritually, to build my **spiritual** muscles, I had to force myself to walk away from some things and some people and walk toward GOD which was also painful at first. But the more I worked my spiritual muscles: the more I prayed, the more I increased my devotion time with God, the more I fellowshiped with other believers, the more I shared my testimony-my story-

my relationship with God with others, the more I study and meditate on the word of GOD, the more I PREACH the word of God, the stronger my SPIRITUAL bones are becoming.

And like the pain of arthritis never COMPLETELY goes away, the pain from LIFE does not either. We are all going to go through some things, that are painful, that hurt, that sometimes feel like we will NEVER recover from. But strengthening our relationship with GOD dramatically reduces the impact of those painful events and those painful relationships in our lives. Because God has a way of ABSORBING the impact. Of replacing toxic, destructive relationships with life-giving, mutual relationships of care and TRUST. God wants his children to be “strong in the LORD and in the power of HIS might.” (*Eph. 6.10*) But it takes intention, and practice, and time WITH GOD. And IF we allow God to strengthen us, and not try to walk in our own strength. **God WILL Strengthen Us.**

GOD WILL SATISFY US

Not JUST satisfy us, but the scriptures says God will satisfy us in parched places, in the worst places in our lives, in the places where there seems to be no life, no hope, no possibilities, just DRY and VOID of any growth or anything good. The verse says, *“You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.”*

ILLUSTRATION:

Now those who know me well, know I love plants. I moved from a house with a larger piece of land with flower beds, a little vegetable garden and a chicken coop to a small plot of land with a container garden. Because I don't have the space or the time to manage anything more. But South Carolina is a different kind of hot, and it has been so hot this summer, that unless I watered my plants twice a day, at night AND in the morning, the soil would be parched, dried up and my plants would wilt and some died within just one day. So, I had to keep my garden well-watered to sustain their beauty and their life. And there were even times, that an unexpected flower, that I didn't plant or didn't think would come back would show up in one of my flowerpots, because unknowingly it rooted in the soil and came back when I THOUGHT it had died.

This passage is comparing US, God's children, to a well-watered garden. A garden that is thriving, that is growing, that is multiplying, that is flowering, that is creating beauty, and beautiful experiences in some parched places here in Asheville and the world around us. And people need to see us who proclaim to be followers of Jesus Christ well-watered and blossoming and bringing the beauty of a loving God to unexpected places like Health-Equity Conferences, like Buncombe County and City of Asheville Government Meetings, like the streets and corners of cities that is the only home our unhoused siblings have. Like election polls, OTHER houses of faith, OTHER communities or just walking alongside a child or a family trying to navigate our school system or the justice system or social services, or our health systems. Because it is THERE... where our **unexpected presence** brings about an unexpected beauty of hope, of possibilities for folks who have simply lost hope. Who never get to see and EXPERIENCE well-watered gardens, who all they know is dry, parched, dying spaces. AND GOD LOVES THEM, and God loves US enough to make sure we never THIRST again. Because our relationship with GOD through Jesus- who is the LIVING Water- the wellspring- the water that leaves us MORE than satisfied, will never dry up. And like Jesus told the Samaritan woman who had lost hope, we will NEVER thirst again. (*John 4.14*)

AND... because everything that God creates multiples, the 23rd Psalm reminds us that OUR cup will run over, (*Psalms 23:5*) and that LIVING water will fill us and overflow from us to those who are parched, to those who are in the desert and the wilderness of life. AND, as THEY are filled and overflowing that water continues flowing forward to the next person and the next person. **IF** we would allow GOD.

God will guide us, strengthen us and satisfy us with a "GOOD measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over." (*Luke 6:38*) Always running over so that other lives can also be guided and strengthen and **satisfied** even in unexpected places. **IF** we would just allow God to have GOD's way and give up ourselves FULLY to God, we will experience the fullness OF God.

Let those who have EARS hear what the Spirit of the Lord is saying. In the name of the Father, in the name of Son, in the name of Holy Ghost. AMEN