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Sermon at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, University of Chicago

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Isaiah 55: 1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 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. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13: 1-9

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

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil? He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Just this week, we are beginning to see signs of spring. Our cabin fever restlessness from a long winter is falling away as we shed the sweaters, layers of clothing, & long coats and feel the sun again on our bare hands and heads. It smells like new growth outside; the

moist, muddy soil and green sprouts leave a promising scent in the air, that soon we will be surrounded by fully growing green plants and colorful buds of flowers.

Lent as a church season parallels this season of nature; a season for spiritual growth, for recognizing the places within ourselves that could use some sloughing off, the habits and deeds and thoughts and attitudes from which we should repent.

Our reading from Isaiah presents beautiful natural images of God's calling and work in the lives of God's people. In Isaiah chapter 55, God's covenant of steadfast love is compared to a rich banquet, good satisfying food and drink. In this covenantal relationship, God calls the people to seek her, to repent and return to the Lord, the One who abundantly pardons. If the people respond, the covenant made with David will be a covenant with the whole nation of Israel, who are in exile but who are being offered an invitation for restoration.

The end of chapter 55 reads: "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, 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. For 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. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

When the people listen to God's word and follow in God's way, nature rejoices. God's word is purposeful and mighty; as the forces of nature that bring sustenance to the people of the earth, so is God's word. God's word is what brings life; God's promises of salvation and steadfast love are solid and sure. But what is a Word that is neglected; what is a promise if it's not believed and acted upon by the receiving party.

Commentary on this Scripture point out that Isaiah is responding to a sense of doubt and despondency among the people in exile; he uses repetition, beautiful imagery, and assurances that God's ways are higher than their ways to re-assure the people that God's promise still stands even in their dire situation of the destruction of their lands and their departure into exile. There is an assurance here in Isaiah that God's word cannot be thwarted. Yet the imagery of covenant leaves open the question; what about the people's end of the bargain; our responsibility for our end of the covenant? Certainly part of our end is faith, belief, repentance when we have gone astray, and a transformation of our ways to align with God's will.

In the gospel reading for today from Luke, we find Jesus speaking on repentance. In discussing some recent tragedies with the crowd, Jesus is countering a popular belief of his time that those who faced misfortune, sickness, or disability were facing the consequence of their dire sin. Jesus tells the crowd that *all* have need of repentance; they are all sinners; they all will perish if they do not change their ways. Jesus is pointing out to them that the need of the hour is to repent, to heed the teachings of Jesus, to recognize his ministry of salvation, to be saved from death.

In the previous chapter of Luke, in speaking with the very same crowd, Jesus tells them: "when you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'it is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" Jesus is drawing attention to his teaching; this crucial time of his ministry, and the people's lack of response to it.

Likewise in talking with the people about those Galileans who died or those who died at Siloam, Jesus seems to be saying to the crowd: "when interpreting the signs of the times,

you must look to yourself (as well), your own culpability, your own need for repentance and change.”

In reading these Scriptures, with their bountiful imagery of nature and of their pointing to the signs of the times and toward repentance and change, I could not help but think of one of the most increasingly urgent signs of our times, climate change. In the past few years, we have seen natural disasters wreak havoc, the tsunami in South Asia and Hurricane Katrina. These disasters have disproportionately affected the vulnerable and poor of the earth, those in countries without the means to erect tsunami warning systems, or those without the means to evacuate, to move to safer ground, in the case of Hurricane Katrina. In addition to these very visible, and very tragic events, there’s much disaster going on slowly but surely in ways that aren’t as apparent to us, but about which we are being warned through scientific reports and through the efforts of Al Gore’s campaign and film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, among other documentaries and means of media.

In their article, *The Greening of the World’s Religions*, scholars Mary Evelyn Tucker & John Grim, who teach religion and ecology at Yale, draw from the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment to paint this picture (from which I’ll quote at length):

“We humans are destroying the life support systems of the planet at an alarming rate. The data keep pouring in that we are altering the climate and toxifying the air, water, and soil so that the health of humans and other species is at risk. The population explosion in the 20th century from two billion to more than six billion people and the consequent devouring of resources are on a collision course with global sustainability. Global warming is already evident in melting glaciers, thawing tundra, and flooding of coastal regions. Furthermore, scientists are documenting that we are living in the midst of a sixth extinction, with more than 20,000 species lost annually. This period represents the largest loss of species since the extinction of the dinosaurs, 65 million years ago. In other words, we are shutting down life systems and causing the end of our geological era.”

End quote

In light of this reality, Tucker and Grim pose relevant questions to people of faith: What is our moral responsibility toward future generations?

How can we ensure equitable development that does not destroy the environment? And they ask: Why have religions been so late in responding to environmental issues?

Climate change should be looked at as a *moral* issue that adversely and disproportionately affects the poor of the world. It is also a *theological* issue, turning upon the Christian good of human flourishing and going beyond it to the flourishing of the whole community of life, and addressing the future of human-earth relations.

It seems that at this moment in time, we are being offered an invitation to restoration; we are late in reading these signs of the times, so now is truly the time to wake up. Our way of life is destroying that which is loved by God and that which is gift to us. (Will we repent of our greed and consumption and listen and learn what God is pointing out to us in the signs of our time?)

In the parable that Jesus tells at the end of our Gospel reading today, the gardener asks the owner of the vineyard for more time to allow the fig tree to bear fruit, giving it nurturance in the meantime so that it might bear fruit in the future. We can take this metaphorically as it's likely meant to be taken, that God gives us time to repent and bear the fruits of a faithful life, meanwhile nurturing us in order that we may be able to do so. But let us also take it (literally) for our own times, as a call to nurture the trees, and the ecosystems that sustain us as part of our *discipline* of repentance and transformation to a way of life that promotes growth toward wholeness as people, as communities, as *one* inhabitant species among *many* on this glorious earth.

-ee cummings penned the following poem as part of his collection entitled Xaipe (ky-ray -a Greek greeting meaning "Rejoice")

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any--lifted from the no
of allnothing--human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Today, how can we not breathe deeply in awe of the beauty of this new spring season, of the cycles of nature that keep us, and the rich diversity of our planet, alive? How can we not say thank you for this gift from God.

And how can we not be moved in urgency to uphold our end of the covenant? To repair our ways to stop the drastic destruction our greed, our hunger for convenience and goods and power, is wreaking upon this planet, our home. Now is the time to save ourselves, and our neighbors, and other forms of life created by God-from death. Now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened because there is not much time to tarry. Amen.