

“Choose a New World”

Rev. David Gregory

September 5, 2021

Pentecost 16



Readings

Isaiah 35:4-7

an excerpt from the New Revised Standard Version

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

“Be strong, do not fear!”

The eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,

and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,

and the thirsty ground springs of water;

the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp;

the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Listen, a poem by Barbara Crooker

from *Healing the Divide: Poems of Kindness and Connection*

I want to tell you something. This morning

is bright after all the steady rain, and every iris,

peony, rose, opens its mouth, rejoicing. I want to say,

wake up, open your eyes, there’s a snow-covered road

ahead, a field of blankness, a sheet of paper, an empty screen.

Even the smallest insects are singing, vibrating their entire bodies,

tiny violins of longing and desire. We were made for song.

I can’t tell you what prayer is, but I can take the breath

of the meadow into my mouth, and I can release it for the leaves’

green need. I want to tell you your life is a blue coal, a slice

of orange in the mouth, cut hay in the nostrils. The cardinals’

red song dances in your blood. Look, every month the moon

blossoms into a peony, then shrinks to a sliver of garlic.

And then it blooms again.

As a minister, I've been doing what I do for quite some time; longer than I'd like to admit, really. I was ordained in 1983 when what is known as the "religious right" was a new phenomenon. Maybe it was because I was also young, but so much of what I had to say in public during that time was pretty theoretical and mostly insufferable. My faith was in a set of ideas, and it seemed that it was my job to defend them. If we plugged in the right ideas, then everything would be just fine. This world we were trying to create was just a matter of time. We would preach our way there, and when enough people embraced our ideas, things would change. From the vantage point of today, I can only marvel at how arrogant I was.

It was a different world then. I was a different person then. The decision known as *Roe v. Wade* had been around for just a decade, and as a young twenty-something evangelical preacher, I was one of those infuriating ideologues addicted to a myth of certainty. It embarrasses me now. I won't take time to pick this apart. I'm writing a book about it, so if you can't fathom any of this, the deeper explanation is coming; fair warning. My point this morning is that it was all theoretical. We thought the world was falling apart; it wasn't. We thought the times were unprecedented; they weren't. We thought the worst things had already happened; they hadn't. I had a lot of growing up to do before I could even begin to see a broader picture of the world and my place in it. I'm still working on that.

Over the last five years, it feels to me as though things have been spinning out of control. The rise of authoritarianism, both in our country and in other parts of the world, leaves me feeling a bit blindsided. I didn't really think it would be this way. Things were supposed to get better. I thought we were evolving. I'm disappointed, concerned, sometimes even frightened. And it becomes impossible now to speak in theoretical terms, not with so much swirling around us: environmental disasters, unprecedented weather events, hatred and violence, political insanity, a global pandemic. We just pulled out of our longest war, and women's reproductive freedom has been challenged in a way that hasn't happened in almost fifty years. And that's just this past week. It does not stop. But if any of this feels terribly surprising to us, readers of history seem less surprised, less blindsided, and therefore more hopeful than the rest of us. Their thoughts are less apocalyptic or dystopian, and I don't think it's due to cynicism. It's a function of the broader view.

From the vantage point of a larger view, we can understand that we've been here before. To help us get to this higher outlook, we have prophets, sages, historical seers, poets, philosophers, and even a few preachers. Facing a confluence of destructive forces, one of those prophets named Isaiah could speak of waters breaking forth in the wilderness to create streams in the desert. This is the same Isaiah who was predicting the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. He was among those who looked forward to something better, and perhaps knew it was coming, because the same thing had happened before. The same thing would happen again.

Droughts happen, and they give way to streams. Injustice becomes the rule rather than the exception, until the day when justice prevails. Decisions are overturned, and then overturned again. The problem for us is that the changes we'd love to see in the world may not happen in our own lifetime, and the question is *does that need to be a problem?* Can we get high enough above the craziness to see that this is a moment in history, a snapshot in the album of human history that does not represent what we may become?

Contemporary poet Barbara Crooker reminds us that there is a field of blankness in front of us, a huge white page on which to create something new – *always* something new. Unlike the arrogant young preacher, I can tell you that none of us is creating this alone. We exist in the telescopes of generations. We pick things up as we find them and carry them to our own finish line, where someone else has already picked it up and started carrying it forward. The only problem I had when I was young was that I hadn't lived long enough. So this is not a moment to say to the world, "There, there now. Everything will turn out all right." Instilling a hope that is false is downright cruel. But what about a hope that is true?

Our poet throws it out in front of us when she asks us to think about our relationship to the plants. She takes the meadow into her mouth and nostrils and answers it with her exhale which meets the need of the green leaves. Have you thought about the wordless conversation we have with plants? The leaves produce oxygen. We breathe in that oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. The plants take in carbon dioxide and produce oxygen. If that weren't enough (she says), then look at how the moon blossoms like a peony, becomes a sliver of garlic and then blooms again. It happens over and over and over and over.

When I can get far enough above the fray, when I can return to a place where I can see the constant and evolutionary cycles of history, when I can see myself in the big picture, it is then that I can let go of whatever it is I'm trying to control, and step into the realm of allowing it to flow. There is a better world coming, and I know that because it's been here before. We have a vision for it; we're pining for it; we're working hard for change. Let's keep working, voting, standing up, speaking out, devoting ourselves to the next loving action. And with every loving action, let us open ourselves to the flow of it.

