

**July 12, 2020  
Christ the Servant, Reston  
Pentecost 6  
Isaiah 55:10-13  
Matthew 12:1-9, 18-23**

**I appreciate Pastor Davidson standing in for me last Sunday. Following our very exciting and overwhelmingly affirmative vote to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation, it was good to have a Sunday off. I watched, with Marilyn, from our breakfast table as we sipped coffee. You may not have noticed, but I have taken off the Sunday closest to the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in each of my 11 years with you. The reason? That was Family Camp weekend at Camp Mowana in Ohio where I would go and speak the Good News in the midst of the goodness of nature. But they sold the camp last year, so I stayed home and enjoyed some walks, hikes, and bike rides in some very sweet spots in Northern Virginia.**

**So, I come back refreshed. During my time among the mountains and the hills, the trees and the fields, I asked myself this question: How does a pastor bring a word of hope in the time of Coronavirus? It seems like such a hopeless time. Each day we hear the depressing news and see the charts showing how more and more states are spiking upward with positive tests, hospitalizations, and deaths. If there isn't good news, how does one preach the Good News?**

**Well, God gave me an answer by placing before my eyes our first reading from Isaiah. It is a message of hope to a people who had lost hope. The people of Israel were being held captive in a foreign country, Babylon. Had God forgotten about them? Would things turn out ok? How refreshing it must have been for them to hear the prophet Isaiah's words which not only spoke hope, but wrapped it in the imagery of God's good creation ... the mountains and the hills, the trees and the fields.**

First, Isaiah assures them that God will not quit until creation is made whole. Listen to God's beautiful word of promise spoken through his prophet, Isaiah: "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".

That gives us the promise that God will not let God's creation fall apart. God works to restore creation. It is God's purpose. God's word "shall accomplish that which I purpose," Isaiah says. Creation. You. Me. The mountains and the hills. The trees of the field. Creation. It shall come back.

It is hard to find a silver lining in the time of Coronavirus. But if there is one, it is to the environment. Since the pandemic hit, the burning of fossil fuels is at a record low. As a result, nitrogen dioxide pollution in the northern United States is down 30%. The air from Boston to Washington is the cleanest since a NASA satellite started measuring it. Stars seem more visible at night. It is a worldwide phenomenon. Residents in northern India woke up this month to see a site a younger generation had never seen – the snow-capped Himalayan peaks more than 100 miles away. Wildlife, too, is flourishing. Coyotes have meandered along Michigan Ave. in Chicago. Goats took over an entire town in Wales. And sea turtle nesting has increased because of the decreased human activity on the beaches. One naturalist reminds us that the wildlife has always been there. They just come out when humans stay home.

Water, too, is becoming cleaner. In Venice the canals have become crystal clear as boat traffic has diminished. When Isaiah speaks of Israel's salvation he does it with environmental language. Beautiful environmental imagery. He is telling them that they will go out of their captivity in Babylon. And who will rejoice when this salvation comes? Creation! Listen to God's beautiful promise to captive

**Israel: “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.”**

**Make no mistake. It is not a passage about the environment per se. It is a passage about salvation. But wrapping salvation in environmental imagery serves as a reminder to us that God yearns to bring back his entire *creation* – and that includes not just you and me, but the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and – as Isaiah says – the mountains and the hills and the trees and the fields. We are in relationship with the mountains and the hills and the trees and the fields. They are our brothers and sisters of creation. Our baptismal covenant demands that we take care of them.**

**So, Pastor Carl, does this mean that God will bring us back from the deadly Corona virus just as God brought Israel safely back from Babylon? Is that the way it works? Does the virus just ... go ... away? Well, it’s like a variation of that over-used sermon illustration: The news reporter, wearing a mask, approached a man in a crowded beach bar standing shoulder to shoulder with others not wearing masks, laughing and talking loudly. The reporter said, “Aren’t you afraid of contracting the virus?” The man, who had a Jesus tattoo on his left arm and a confederate flag on his right, said, “No. I am a man of faith. God will take care of me.” Well, the man contracted Covid 19, suffered greatly, and died. When he finally met his maker he asked God, “Why didn’t you do anything for me?” God said, “I did. I gave you a mask. I gave you social distancing guidelines. And I gave you common sense.”**

**We play a part in solving this pandemic and we pray for those who are working on a vaccine. But much of the burden of making things better falls to us and how we choose to behave. Also, when things return to normal, when the**

automobiles begin again to choke the beltway, when the factories fire up again, then we will bear a responsibility to our brothers and sisters of creation – the mountains and the hills, the trees and the fields. My beloved Camp Mowana is now a nature conservancy for all to come enjoy the hills and the trees and the fields. It has been returned to nature. And this is a good thing. I took part of my time away to hike, with Matt, the trails behind our county water filtration plant. The short hike turned out to be a sermon about how we humans can return what God has given us to God the same way it came *from* God. The “used” water was filtered through a series of natural ponds, wetlands, waterfalls, and streams until it emptied – pure and clean – into the river. And the entire acreage attracted fish, a wide variety of birds, and beautiful species of water lilies and other plants. Like the sign says on the hiking trails, “Leave it like you found it.”

In just a minute Susan will teach you a song. It is set to a Jewish dance melody and it calls for some audience participation. The verse is taken directly from our Isaiah 55 passage: “You shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace, and the mountains and the hills will break forth before you. There’ll be shouts of joy and the trees of the fields will clap, will clap their hands.” The refrain repeats the line, “And the trees of the field will clap their hands.” Your part is to actually clap your hands each time you see the word “clap.” Now I know some of you have not been singing along with the hymns, but you can all clap your hands. It is a fun song.

So now let us go forth in joy. Let us be led forth in peace, confident in the promise and the hope God gives us that we will be restored – to health, to life, to our creator, and to creation itself.