

Season of Creation
Desolation Sunday
The Rev. Susan Plucker

Isaiah 5:1-10
Mark 11:12-20

During the month of September

It is the tradition of St. Benedicts to celebrate the Season of Creation.
The scripture readings reflect on the wonder and abundance of creation,
the damage that is wreaked upon it and the desire and hope for healing.

The past two Sundays focused on joy and abundance.

The last one will be restoration.

Today we're stuck with DESOLATION.

OH DEAR...Not my 1st choice.

Or at least, that was my initial response...

Hearing the word desolation conjures up for me many stark, bleak,
dark, lonely, lifeless landscapes and feelings

The utter desolation I experienced when Frank, my husband died.

The desolation of lava fields, great sand dunes, rocky peaks above the tree line

The Desolation of Smaug in The Hobbit.

Desolation Wilderness around Lake Tahoe

More desolate now after the fires.

A vegetable garden at its late summer peak,
completely beaten down by a severe hailstorm,

Ahhh, how could I almost forget.

Our home of 6 months and its surrounding acreage and shelters for the animals
covered with 4 foot of muddy flood waters
including dead goats, chickens, turkeys.....
the week before Christmas

I have known desolation and most of you probably have also

The dictionary definition of desolation is

“a state of complete emptiness or destruction,
anguished misery or loneliness.”

The environment of creation reflects our inner landscape

With its seasons and cycles and ebbs and flows

And death and life, light and dark and all the shades in between.

And way before environmental, psychological or spirituality studies,

The wise people of God knew this and used this reality of nature

To speak to the people.

The prophet Isaiah is not literally talking about someone

Who owned a vineyard

as around us, many do today,

Nor is he literally talking about an actual vineyard of his day and the failure of its crop.

Isaiah is speaking of God.

“I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard.”

He is speaking about God and the people of God
Who once again have gone astray.
They are not caring for their people
They are not producing justice and peace.
They are creating their own state of desolation; emptiness and destruction
And oblivious to its effects on each other and their community.

And God is the one experiencing desolation
That misery and loneliness we heard in the definition above.

God's delight is gone....
There is no good fruit being produced, let alone distributed and shared
The peoples life-giving actions and attitudes
have dried up and withered away.

It is not until Chapter 27 that we catch a glimpse
Of new life again arising from the vineyard
As God sings;
"Let it cling to me for protection,
Let it make peace with me,
Let it make peace with me (v.5).

Jesus also uses the rhythms and cycles of the world of nature
For his teachings and revelations concerning God.

Poor fig tree. Its growing where its planted,
Minding its own business,
Producing fruit in due season, we can assume.
And Jesus walks by in a snit about something
And curses it for not having fruit (out of season) on it for him to eat.

But when did he ever get so angry
That not finding anything life-giving on a tree or bush or plant
That he curses it to the point that we have to assume it died?
As we hear that later on,
the disciples passed the same spot again
and saw the fig tree withered from the roots.

To us, this little vignette seems so very odd, a puzzle almost.
But to the readers of Mark's gospel, probably not so much.
They would not hear it as a confusing story of petty anger or impatience,
Jesus having a bad day.

They would hear it in a much bigger context than a single cursed fig tree.

People familiar with the Hebrew Scripture, which Mark's readers were,
would hear the cursing of the fig tree echoing the cursing of the vineyard,

and pointing back to the prophetic wisdom of the past,
Such as we just heard from our Isaiah passage.
And they would have heard it as setting the context for the next vignette;
The over-throwing of the money changers.

Let me repeat:

Jesus, (just as Isaiah was), is speaking about God and the people of God,
Who once again have gone astray.
They are not caring for their people
They are not producing justice and peace.
They are creating their own state of desolation; emptiness and destruction
And oblivious to its effects on each other and their community

And God is the one experiencing desolation
That misery and loneliness we heard in the definition above.

God's delight is gone....
There is no good fruit being produced, let alone distributed and shared
The peoples life-giving actions and attitudes
have dried up and withered away.

People, listen!
Isaiah says...
Jesus proclaims...

God is the one to follow. God the one to trust.
God the one to listen to and love and honor and obey'
Not power or authority or money or prestige....
Those are simply the gifts of God to be used wisely in the service of others
In the service of creation
Not in the service of self.

In the gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree
and then driving out the money changers in the temple
Are set right after Jesus' triumphal entrance to Jerusalem
(Palm Sunday)
And right before
Jesus' ultimate time of desolation, his time on the cross.

And we know the rest of that desolation story.
We are part of the new life of the rest of that story.

And as such I believe that we can be assured
That desolation is never the end of the story.

What looks empty, devoid of life, totally destroyed
By forces of nature or forces of humankind
Seldom is.

So often I have marveled at sightings
Of sprouts of life squeaking through the seemingly impossible;
Weeds coming through the concrete of the driveway,
Small trees hanging on to a rock face by a root or two
The last wild flower on the slopes of Mt. Lassen
The first one poking up through the snow.
I marvel at the tenacity, resilience, courage and abundant desire and need to live
That we and all creation are created and blessed with.

I marvel and bow down before God's tenacity, resilience, courage, forgiveness,
love and eternal desire to be one with us;
The patience of our God to call us back again and again,
unrelenting, never ceasing.
As the waves coming upon the shore,
Sometimes gently, sometimes ferociously,
Unrelenting, never ceasing.

In these difficult, challenging times of pandemic, global warming, rapid climate change—
More rapid and upon us sooner than I imagined...

The seasons of Joy and Abundance call for gratitude, thanksgiving, celebration....
In those seasons, hope and faith are usually alive and well,
With enough flowing over and around to be shared.

But not so, with the season of desolation,
The deep, dark, frigid days of winter,
The terrifying days of flood and fire
The grieving days of illness and death
The days of unknowing and not having answers yet for the challenges
We are expecting in the next few decades, years, days...

In that season, we are called to see desolation for what it truly is...
The harbinger of hope;
maybe not hope itself
That may be asking too much...
But the harbinger that says watch for that first sprout
Listen for that small voice
Reach out for God
Make peace with God
Don't give up.

As I said at the beginning,
desolation was not my first choice of a topic to live with
these last two weeks as I came to this preaching time this morning,
But it came and chose to live with me in many ways,
And today I stand here and offer my gratitude for the journey.

My closing consists of two snippets from
The book Beauty by John O'Donahue
And the story of a dream...not mine

But from someone else, gracious to share it
And for it to be passed on.
(like fruit on the vine)....

I bring these to you as harbingers of hope borne of desolation.

They are all around us.

We need only open our eyes, open our ears, open our hearts
And then help others to do the same.

I offer you two snippets of John's thoughts,

One from the section, The Colour of Beauty, The Secret Life of Black.

The other from the section, The Music of Beauty, The Healing Voice.

The Secret Life of Black: "In terms of physics, black occurs when an object is absorbing all of the coloured wavelengths. This is why nothing is reflected back. Black represents pure hunger for colour; it exercises no generosity, the eye receives nothing. When it (the eye) looks at black, it is looking at the grave of colour. It is not surprising that black has been the colour of grief and mourning.

Yet, it is not that black is without colour; it is rather that it is the absence, the outer surface, behind which colours secretly dwell. The heart of blackness is full of colour. " (p. 95)

The Healing Voice: "When suffering arrives at the door of your life, you feel lost and isolated... Suffering brings you to a land where no-one can find you. In the desolate and torn terrain of suffering there is no beauty that reaches deeper than the beauty of the healing voice. It can find its way across any distance to the desolate heart of another's pain. In his classic reflection on *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger discovered that at the heart of time dwelt 'care'. The ability to care is the hallmark of the human, the touchstone of morality and the ground of holiness. Without the warmth of care, the world becomes a graveyard. In the kindness of care, the divine comes alive in us."

The dream or rather, the nightmare:

Asleep, I was suddenly awoken by the sight of a large meteor hurtling toward my room.

Sitting up, utterly startled, I began to write of what I saw, as is my practice.

As I wrote, I realized that the meteor was in the shape

Of a large human heart,

Not the Hallmark image of a heart,

But the organic, biological, human heart with its large arteries and veins.

And the thought, the reality that came to me is:

Yes, something terrible is happening

AND what is needed from us at this time

Is larger hearts.....

MORE COMPASSION.

Wow!

The heart of blackness is full of colour.

At the heart of time dwells care.

What is needed now is larger hearts

More compassion.

Seasons, landscapes of desolation.

Harbingers of hope.

Thanks be to God.