

Sermon for Mt. Carmel Lutheran

Sunday April 15th, 2018

Friends, grace and peace to you this morning. It is good to be with you, and a joy to be invited to speak a word as we journey from the open tomb, as a changed Easter people.

Thanks for bearing with me as I switched up the texts a bit this morning – jumping ahead and getting to this Pentecost reading a few weeks early – but honestly, I think it’s kind of fitting. We read the first half of the lectionary text from John for this week, and those verses run quite parallel to the Pentecost story in Acts. In both scriptures the disciples are holed up in a closed room inside – and suddenly the Spirit comes to them, in John’s Gospel it is Jesus who shows up and *breathes* on them, in Acts it’s this violent rushing wind and tongues of fire.

The wind of the Spirit is a captivating image and tangible reality in these scriptures – mysterious, powerful, empower-ing, rushing and forceful, quiet and gentle, and really, bearing a new understanding of God in light of Christ’s Resurrection. Here we are on the other side of the empty tomb, experiencing the sustaining and activating force of God that continues to be present with the disciples in this post-death-resurrection reality of Jesus.

In John Jesus’s very breath – what an image, of this risen Christ breathing on them, saying “peace,” over and over. This sense of Spirit is so vulnerable and embodied – it’s the feeling the warm, gentle breath of a loved one as you hold them close. Then the violent rushing wind filling the upper room, startling the disciples, stirring up flames above their heads, propelling them out the door to witness to the Gospel. *These winds bringing to mind scenes from the Wizard of Oz – “it’s a twister!”* Winds whipping up fences and whirling through the house.

Growing up in Nebraska, I’m very familiar of the windy prairie – rushing wind is a powerful force—and one that also gives us power in a very literal sense. Over the past number of years as I make the trek down I35 through Iowa and across I80, I’ve seen wind farm after wind farm pop up in the fields. In our Minnesota, wind generation accounted for 18% of our energy in 2017, a huge jump from the 4% it was at 10 years ago. The cost of wind energy and solar energy alike have dramatically dropped in price over the years. Wind is powerful, and today the cheapest form of electrical energy generation, even cheaper than fully depreciated coal plants.

And how beautiful that these renewable energy sources come from these very physical and tangible realities through which we experience the presence of God – wind and light.

What a different paradigm than that of fossil fuels, an energy system in which we are deeply entrenched, and a system built upon extraction and exploitation. Unsustainable energy systems rely on systemically deconstructing nature, tearing down, tearing apart, cutting through – removing mountaintops, slashing forests, extracting oil and running it through pipelines that zigzag through soil and wetland, crossing river and aquifer. These practices are not only ones that we’re concerned about during Earth Day Month, but are issues that should cut deep for us as people of faith. When the holy place is the mountaintop and yet gets dismantled for coal production – as coal is still the single greatest source of electricity, when we baptize with water but an overwhelming majority of our waters in

Southern MN are unsafe for swimming or fishing, too polluted to pour over the heads of our children – then we know something has gone awry.

What's striking to me is the significance our trouble with the land carries through the lens of scripture. The prophets wrote images eerily similar to the large scale environmental degradation and climate instability that is our current reality. Here these words from the prophet Isaiah: *"The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant..."*

The prophet goes on for many more verses, describing the earth as "utterly broken," as "staggering and swaying," "torn asunder," and "shaken."

This isn't just hyperbole used for literary effect – because for God's people in the community of ancient Israel didn't see the land as a pretty backdrop or a recreational commodity to enjoy, this was an agricultural community that depended on the land for their livelihood and sustenance and felt a close connection to the earth. The land's disruption was a life disruption and a major wake-up call. If something was going wrong with the land, it was the first indicator that something was wrong, that injustice was being done and consequently that something was wrong between God and God's people. We see this in the creation stories and throughout the Old Testament scriptures – and I'm telling you, it completely changes the way you think about creation, if you actually see the land as squarely in the middle of humanity's unfolding relationship with God.

Friends, what does all this say to us today? That our earth "lies polluted under its inhabitants" and "stagger and sways." I'm reminded of the writings of Bill McKibben, as he argues we need to actually start misspelling the word "earth" – reminding us that this earth we inhabit isn't the same as the old one, that enough major ecological features of our planet and climate patterns have shifted that there's something fundamentally different now. That we live on a tough new version of our fragile earth. That is utterly broken, torn asunder.

And that all this is profoundly tied to issues of injustice, just as the prophets would have us know. Violent storms and rising water always hits the hardest those who are already vulnerable – those in more tenuous regions and with fewer resources to relocate or recover. Communities that have relied on growing crops on a piece of land that has yielded them food for generations are faced with the reality that might not be the case tomorrow. Having clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and food that nourishes the body, are no longer given on a tough new planet, and we all know who bears the brunt of that reality – the Pope's words ring loudly "The world's poor, though least responsible for climate change [and environmental degradation], are... already suffering its impact." And people that have inhabited, tilled, or held sacred a land that now is an attractive resource of economic value, suddenly become subject to exploitation.

What happened at Standing Rock is such a clear example of this, a poignant story of environmental racism. Because of course, the pipeline was originally slated to go further north, directly above Bismarck, but was but was rerouted because of concern over contamination of the water supply to the area. It was enough of a concern to move it south of Bismarck... and cutting instead just north of the reservation. Curiously enough, the land where the pipeline currently goes was a part of the original treaty lands – land taken away again (nearly 56,000 acres worth) from the Lakota and Dakota people when the Army

Corps of Engineers dammed the Missouri River to create Lake Oahe in 1948. That year the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe lost not only their rights to a large area of land, but the dam flooded the main village where the people lived, submerging their homes and forcing them to move. The pipeline not only would directly affect the reservation in the event of a leak, but was being forced through land that had been taken away over and over again.

Regardless of what kind of environmental issue we're addressing we *must* be asking the questions: "Who ultimately has control over this resource? Who benefits? Who suffers?"

I know this is hard. I know these questions ask a lot from us – where we fit in these systems that harm and exploit, our own benefit, our own culpability in a system much larger than we control. These questions cut to the culpability of those who make decisions about our resources and those who enjoy the economic benefit of our systems, who work to maintain the status quo, who cares if it's filled with dust and dying. Yet this is where we get to show up as Easter people, who have a very different word and different calling. We don't let death have the final say; we fight the urge to let the power of empire force us fearfully into a closed room.

I'm reminded of the Valley of the Dry Bones – another dust and earth-shapen narrative from our ancient scriptures – one often linked with Pentecost – that doesn't envision the dried up, parched land, and the death the people suffered as the final word either. The prophet shows up in this place of violence and injustice, in this land that has withered and languished, and speaks a prophetic word of breath and wind into the valley, speaking new life into being.

Oh how our dry bones and dry valleys need these promise, not only spiritually but in a very literally earth-healing sense. A prophetic speaking of life, breathing of Spirit, that doesn't stop with Ezekiel but is joined by the breathing and breathless women rushing from the tomb speaking of this living Jesus, joined by the disciples speaking to Thomas "We have seen the Lord," and the apostles filled with the Holy Spirit who spoke loudly in every language of the Gospel news of life eclipsing death. These are Easter people who can't keep quiet, and are speaking a new reality into a broken world.

What I love about the Pentecost story in Acts is that not only does the rushing wind break in through the closed doors and fill the upper room of the house, but it propels the disciples out – onto the street corner, to speak boldly in public space! And then immediately they begin to *share* and *steward* their resources, to hold all things in common, work for the common good, and launch a *movement* that challenges the powers of the status quo and gather people into life-giving community.

It asks of us today the question: How will you speak and show up? What is your call – our call – as Easter people in a world that need some serious mending? Do you find yourself unable to keep quiet? What do you steward as one who has been transformed by the promise of new life? How could we better hold things in common for the benefit of all, dismantling a structure of decimating resources and using them for the benefit of some at the expense of others?

Well, you're in luck, be thankfully we are not alone in this work, and we're just getting started. You have an advocate in your pastor and in Grace Corbin (who will be with you next week) and myself on synod staff. We can explore what growing edges of stewardship you might have in building and grounds or collective practices. We need people ready to show up with Spirit-filled voices in the public square as our elected officials make critical decisions about clean energy and equity in the use of our resources.

And we are here with the sign of the cross no longer as a reality of death but sign of new life and this surprising, upending work of the risen Christ – with the watery, windy, Spirit compelling us onward, filling our voices with a new song, drawing us out of closed rooms to courageously be a part of God's work of healing and justice for all of creation.

Amen.