

Scripture
Ezekiel 31: 3-7

Radical Compassion

The beauty and fragility of life are intrinsically intertwined. You see this in every labour pain of a woman giving birth. Every time we face the death of someone we've loved and cared about we are given the opportunity to see the pain and gift of relationship. Nature experiences it too with every flower that burst forth from a seed and works its way out of the dark soil, every chick that chips through the shell of an egg and wrestles its fluffy body forth, every leaf that turns golden before it falls to the earth.

The book of Ezekiel was written during a time of destruction, theological crisis, and exile. The prophet tells of God's judgment against Israel, God's judgement on the nations, and at last, God's rebuilding of Israel. The book may strike the reader as bizarre: fiery creatures with human/lion/eagle faces, dry bones come alive. It's a bit beyond comprehension at times. But maybe this is intentional? Biblical scholar Jacqueline Lapsley writes, "Ezekiel's language moves at the boundaries of meaning, because the situation he describes moves at the boundaries of what is expressible, even thinkable."¹

Many of us right now are being confronted with situations that move us to the boundaries of meaning. Both beauty and degradation can be overwhelming. You know that "tip of the tongue" feeling when you can't quite come up with a word for something? There are situations we encounter that feel kind of like that, but on a soul level. I have felt that way many times in the last months and almost constantly in the last few weeks. When covid-19 hit Canada within a couple days we had to alter the way we function, the learning curve was massive and while we were learning how to work differently we were learning what it was like to spend time with our family again. Suddenly our families and children became priority because we had to be together and take time together, care for one another because there was no other 'agency' to do it. It was a precious gift forced upon us in the midst of deep struggle, worry, fear and exhaustion. For the first time in ages we took walks to the river and had bon fires and roasted marshmallows. Family game nights and movie nights are suddenly the norm. The things that we said were priorities are being lived out. But it's not all roses we are exhausted, and we also want to see our friends and our extended families, I desperately miss working in community and I find myself wondering what my purpose is almost daily. It's all intertwined. There has been so much beauty in getting to know my neighbours better, people that I only waved at before I now know what they do, where they came from and what they are passionate about. If you have been in church with me in the

¹ Lapsley, Jacqueline E., "Ezekiel," in Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 285.

last years you will know that the core of my faith is about loving and being in relationship with our neighbours and although we still keep our physical distance we have become a richer community of relationship. Thanks be to God.

Now the rain has come and a pandemic of a different kind has been brought back to the forefront. These days we watch the news and one moment we are in tears because we see another act of violence against a person of colour and in the next moment we are in tears because we see the world showing up in a way many of us have never seen before in the fight against injustice. We are in a shelter in place world wide pandemic and people are protesting injustice in what has become the largest civil rights movement in world history.

I was in a meeting on Tuesday morning and one of the leaders who ‘always has the answer’ said this is not the time for me to have the answers this is time for us to sit in the midst of the hurt and the pain and listen and learn. Another psychologist noted that perhaps people are standing up against the injustice in this time not only because of a viral video but because we were already in a posture of caring for one another. Covid -19 has forced us to be reminded that it is not only about us it is about the community and the people around us. Most of us have stayed home and isolated because we care about not only ourselves but also those in our family and immediate community. Most of us have willingly stood on the dots in the grocery store or on lines outside waiting to get in because we understand we are all in this together and we are community and we care for one another. Businesses that are usually first and foremost about profit have found themselves making shields and masks and sanitizer to protect the public from disease. One suggested that for the first time in a long time people have had time to take notice of the other. In a way a forced contemplative life has started to alter our thinking and bias. One of the things the contemplative life invites us to do is to rest in that feeling and unknowing—to stay and notice what comes up.

The text for today is beautiful and beckons us to meditate on the majesty of nature. The tree of Lebanon did what trees do. Nourished by streams, it grew tall and strong and deep. In return, out of its very being, it provided for the birds and animals. But in context, the image of this tree moves us to the “boundaries of meaning.” This amazing Cedar described is actually compared to the Pharaoh king of Egypt, and in subsequent verses, the tree will come down. It is tempting to say that even its degradation is beautiful and its death leads to new life; the tree’s beauty survives the demise of its “pretty” appearance.

“Creation is vastly complex, diverse, wild. It can be enslaved to human need but it cannot be contained. The smallest patch of land is home to countless beings – plants, animals, and those strange creatures that are neither or both. If we pause and calm our minds for a moment, the natural world can appear to us not merely in its aesthetic wonder – though this is important. It appears to us as if a layer has been removed and the inner light of the trees, moss, ocean tides, stars, flowing water fall shine forth. This light reveals the truth of creation – we are beautiful and for this we were made.

Human beings are a part of creation and are also complex, diverse, wild. For reasons neither religious mythologies nor scientific theories fully unveil, we are estranged from our place in creation, from one another, from ourselves and from the Beloved. Moral ugliness scars the luminosity of our sacred goodness. But this goodness is created and cherished by the Beloved. It therefore participates in a kind of eternity. What is beautiful and sacred in us cannot be destroyed, however much it can be marred. Contemplating the beauty of human beings begins to open our eyes to the truth of who we are. In the perception of the beauty of beings we begin to dwell in the divine kingdom promised us when we see as Jesus did: seeing Christ in all beings, especially the “least of these” (Matthew 25).

As worthy as self-improvement, relaxation, spiritual benefits are – they are not the purpose of a contemplative way of life.

When we love Divine Goodness more deeply, we love the world more passionately. When we love and care for the world, we fall more deeply into divine reality. “God” is not just a magical being in whom we are instructed to believe, but the unnamable, infinite goodness that Christians know as love. When we love one another more beautifully, we enter into the divine realm – whatever our names for it might be. Regardless of the words we use, the primary sign that one loves God is that one loves other people and the world itself.”²

In the next weeks we are going to take time to notice the beauty in the fragility of life. Beauty not in the sense of pretty but beauty as seen with the eyes of the spirit. Beauty isn’t a function of what you buy or possess, in fact it is the exact opposite. Beauty is not just visual or auditory, it is more than that, to truly experience beauty it is a function of our spirit. So when our spirit gets dull or distorted we can completely fail to see beauty. Our spirit can get dulled down so that we fail to see beauty, but our spirit can also come alive to the truth of things. Once that practice becomes alive, once we learn to focus our spirit will be open to the beauty even in the hardest of times.

Whether it’s a pretty thing like the creation that surrounds us, or a person visiting someone in hospice, or someone kneeling in protest, or a neighbour offering a helping hand in a time of need. Dignity and sacred worth, knowing that all are beloved opens the spirit up to see the beauty in all situations.

Wendy Farley writes "*It is impossible to over-emphasize that the core practice of a contemplative way of life is radical compassion.* One’s concentration may be impossibly wandering. One may not be able to sing 3 notes of a chant. A head-stand may prove impossible. Securing twenty minutes twice a day for prayer may be no more realistic than growing wings and flying to the moon. These things are instruments a contemplative might use, but they are not themselves what constitute a contemplative way of life.

² Farley, Wendy *Beguiled by beauty*

A contemplative way of life is motivated by a devotion to the welfare of others. No matter how exhausted we may be with the toils of life we still have a sense of our connectedness with the other. We may feel discouraging pain as we observe the hate speech, acts of violence, the calculated indifference of our times, the horrifying hostility to truthfulness. It may be that this concern for suffering and injustice inspires in you or your community participation in social activism. Or it may simply make you want to binge watch the most recent Netflix series. The difficulty and crisis of the world is overwhelming. It is virtually impossible to bear it without very deep resources. Without watering our roots in deep and life-giving waters, awareness of radical suffering, injustice, and turmoil is likely to distort our capacities for care and responsibility.

In the next weeks we are going to consider what it means to set our hearts on radical compassion – a living desire that the suffering of others be alleviated, no matter who they are.”³ We will set our hearts in a contemplative stance so that we may be beguiled by the beauty of our world and transformed by beloved love.

³ IBID