

Eco Faithfulness 3:
Created for Prophetic Community

by
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Isaiah 65:17-23

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²²They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD— and their descendants as well.

Micah 3:9-4:4

⁹Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, ¹⁰who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! ¹¹Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us.” ¹²Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

⁴In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, ²and many nations shall come and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ³He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; ⁴but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

There is a Ukrainian couple who turn military ammunition boxes into Christian icons. Artist Oleksander Klymenko was struck by how much the cover of a wooden ammunition box could resemble a Christian icon panel. He borrowed one of the boxes from his military base and painted a Byzantine icon featuring the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child. He said the icon looked like a historic one eight hundred years old. The experiment led Klymenko and his artist wife, Sofia, to start a charity project to raise money for a volunteer field hospital treating soldiers in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The project is called, Buy an Icon – Save a Life, and is based on the idea of transforming instruments of death, symbolized by the ammo boxes, into life, symbolized by the Christian icons. The artist says: “It is important for me to show people that the war is real, that this ammunition box is real, and it stored real weapons which kill real people. An ammunition box, like a coffin, is taken from under the ground, where it was stored. Once it is opened, death breaks out of it and destroys everything around. We transform it by painting life.”¹

That is a powerful modern-day example of Micah’s prophetic calling in a time – not unlike our time – when violence is on the war path, people are suffering, and the earth itself seems tipped on the edge of survival. Thus says the Lord: *they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more... The Buy an Icon – Save a Life project is like a contemporary recasting of instruments of violence into farming tools.*

Further, the prophet Micah makes the point that the peace among human community does have implications for the health of the earth: *they shall all sit under their own vines and fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.* Human flourishing, and peace for all, is inextricably tied to the health of the earth. Our call to a more ecologically faithful way of life is a call to this kind of holistic transformation.

¹ Reuters.com. 4/1/22.

Both of today's scripture readings focus our attention to these very same concerns: the health of human community is tied up with the wellbeing of the whole creation; and how we care for one another cannot be separated from our concern for environmental justice. Admittedly, the Christian church has a complicated history when it comes to connecting human vitality with the stewardship of the earth. Because for centuries the church, particularly in the west, perpetuated a misinterpretation of that little word "dominion." *Dominion*, describes the vocation that God gives to the first human creatures back in the first Chapter of Genesis, but was mis-used by the church for long years to support all manner of exploitation.

Back in 1967, Lynn White, a UCLA historian and environmental activist, took the church to task, pointing to the biblical doctrine of human dominion over creation as the key cause for the destructive relationship between Christians and nature. His seminal article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," was used by environmentalists to attack the church and caused much soul searching among Christian theologians and biblical scholars. Because Lynn White was correct in his assessment that the notion of dominion had supported colonial expansion, the taking possession of lands, the destruction of native populations, and the evil support of the slave trade.²

Even today, some religious people still wrongly interpret God's command to humankind *to fill the earth and subdue it* as a license for exploitation of peoples, wildlife, and vast landscapes. However, a proper Biblical reading teaches that God is the ruler of creation, and we humans are mandated to care for the earth, under God, as a way of living out our covenant relationship with God and with nature. Theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther noted: "Christianity should assume that nature is alive, filled with soul or spirit. God is seen as taking profound pleasure in the work of creation, and creation in turn responds to God with praise..."

² Patricia Tull, *Inhabiting Eden*, p. 154-55.

A key prophetic pattern of thought knits together the injustice of humans toward one another and the devastation of the earth. From the biblical point of view,” Reuther concludes, when humans break their covenant with God and with one another by social injustice and war, the covenant between God, humanity and nature is broken. Violence in society and the polluted earth are both violations of the covenant with God.”³

We hear this so clearly in the Micah reading this morning. Here’s the context: In the eighth century BCE, the Assyrian Empire began a season of expansion and destroyed Samaria, at the time the capital city of Israel, and then launched a major offensive against Judah. Thousands of people were slain and many more taken captive. Jerusalem was besieged but escaped full destruction that time. Micah is a prophet in the southern Kingdom of Judah who condemns political corruption naming: *those who abhor justice and pervert all equity...* Micah condemns economic exploitation and dishonest religious practices: *... its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests and prophets teach for money;* Micah condemns an easy but unfounded claim that God is on the side of the oppressor: *Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, Surely the LORD is with us!* But, Micah says – the Lord is not on the side of their injustices, and God will reap judgment upon them until the violent instruments of war are turned into farming tools, and they can once again be reconciled with the earth itself – *sitting in the shade of their own trees and without fear.*

This is God’s intention for all of creation – humankind and nature together: the nations of the world will live according to their limits, economies will devote themselves not to destruction but to tending and cultivating the earth, producing food instead of ammunition. Everyone will enjoy their own piece of the earth, secure and unafraid. All of humankind will be allowed to prosper.

³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Biblical Vision of Eco-Justice,” *Earth and Word*, ed. David Rhoads, p.252 ff.

Now, in this moment of time it is easy to hear this prophetic vision as a direct contrast to the war in Ukraine, and it is! But it can also be heard *as* a word of judgement on the current realities in the United States and any place in the world where we are living in a season of increasing disparities between people of means and the poor; where too many elected officials are more interested in keeping power than working for the common good; where access to weapons intended for mass violence is still far too easy, and where our refusal to get serious about climate change is making parts of our country unlivable.

Micah may be raining down God's judgment upon us in our time. Through the prophet, God is calling us to repent, to turn away from hatred, to restore human community to the goodness God created, and to heal the earth. According to this Biblical, prophetic tradition, we stand in the shadow of God's judgment, but neither Isaiah nor Micah will leave us there. They give us a vivid picture of what turning from violence and toward peace looks like, and what it sounds like: No more cries of distress in the city; no more death in childhood; no more elderly folks uncared for; no one taking possession of another's house or another's land; but rather: God's future is justice and blessing, God's truth will be trusted; God's goodness will last for future generations; *they shall not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain, says the Lord.*

So how do we get from where we are now to that? Susan Cain's new book, *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole* has wisdom that resonates with the prophetic texts we have heard this morning. The book is part memoir, with a look at neuroscience, psychology, spirituality, religion, poetry, and art. She makes the case that our longing for a brighter tomorrow does not have to end in despair. Actually, our sorrow can fuel transformation and change our behavior for the good. "Bitter-sweetness is the hidden source of masterpieces and love stories," she writes. When we look at the victims of violence and the degradation of the earth, the sadness and compassion that come to the fore are what she calls "pro-social emotions." Sadness, compassion and longing – as pro-social emotions are agents of

connection and love. In the oldest, most instinctive part of our nervous system we have a sadness – joy – survival encoding that makes us human. She gives this example: when a baby cries we intuitively go to protect the vulnerable one; we are innately caring and protective. “We would do better,” she says, “to understand that the most fundamental aspect of being human is the longing to live in a more perfect and beautiful world than the one that we are in now. When we see something beautiful – a waterfall, a flower in bloom, a sunrise across the water – so beautiful that it makes us almost cry – that’s a spiritual impulse we’re having.” She says, “It is an expression of longing for a more perfect and beautiful world that we all feel like we come from and that we need to return to.”⁴

Friends, it is articulated differently, but I have heard so many people say they are almost paralyzed by despair these days. The chaos of our world and country; what’s going on in Ukraine and in Washington, the magnitude of climate change, you name it. What we need to realize is what Susan Cain is getting at which is what I believe the prophets are also trying to tell us. Experiencing the sorrow we see in the world today can actually carry us to the divine.

Alone, we cannot save the planet and we cannot end violence among human beings, but each of us can do our part. If we hang on to God’s vision for the future, we may just live toward it, change our behavior and creatively engage what is ugly and destructive to make something beautiful, and help heal the earth. Just imagine our doing everything in our power to turn instruments of violence into farming tools or works of art. AMEN.

⁴ Pilar Guzman, In Defense of Melancholy: Susan Cains new book examines how sadness makes us whole,” NYTimes, 4/5/22.