

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 ~ Luke 12:32-40
How We Can Make the Earth a Better Place to Live
 9th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Isaiah 1:1, 10-20:

What does God want us to do? What is God's will for us? We pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," but life can get complicated, and often it is hard to know for sure what God wants us to do. Or to stop doing. If only God would just tell us more plainly, we'd do it, right? Well, I am about to read a passage from Isaiah where the prophet relays *exactly* what God wants and does not want.

Spoiler alert: the language is pretty harsh. God is clearly angry. This text was addressed originally to Judah in the second half of the 8th century B.C.E. God is so fed up and angry with his beloved chosen people of Judah, he can't even stand their worship anymore. What you are about to hear would be like God saying to us, "Not another one of your hymns! And I cannot endure those sermons, preacher! Don't even bother praying the Lord's Prayer! I won't be listening. And those offerings, electronic or in the plates, forget it! They are nothing to me." Now that would certainly get our attention, wouldn't it?

Listen for how it shifts in verse 16, from God's anger, to what they need to start doing to make things right. As angry as God is, God has not given up on Judah. Yes, they have been disobedient: greedy and inhospitable to those who are vulnerable and hurting. But God still offers them a way back. God tells them what they need to do. And is telling us what we need to do, today. But, will we, do it?

Communion Meditation:

A New Yorker cartoon caught my eye and made me chuckle. In this cartoon, you see a pirate, having gleefully opened a large treasure box (of the classic pirate trope variety) that he had just dug up from the ground, only to discover that the box is completely filled with just one thing: cheese. The pirate is obviously shocked, disheartened and dismayed. He cannot believe what he is seeing. Meanwhile, standing tall beside the box is a gleeful mouse. The mouse and the pirate have completely different ideas of what treasure is. Now here in Wisconsin, cheese is pretty high up there for us, too. But for the pirate in the picture, not so much.

Treasure for a mouse is cheese. But what about a rabbit? What is treasure for a rabbit? (Anyone have or had a pet rabbit? Then you know better than I.) My deep dive research (one click on google) taught me that rabbits are *supposed* to eat hay. But they really love leafy green vegetables: arugula, basil, carrot tops. That is *their* treasure. A mouse treasures cheese and a rabbit, leafy greens: their concept of treasure will not change. That's the way God made them. One of my favorite American poets, Jane Hirshfield, has captured the rabbit's heart and limited orbit with this bit of verse:

*And still: any rabbit the center
 of its own rabbit world,
 its universe axis a nest of tamped-down grasses.*

*It looks out its ground-level eyes,
is warm, is curious, hungry,
its heart beats faster or slower
with its own rabbit fate.*

*A rabbit's soul cannot help
but choose its own ears, its own paws,
its own startlement, sleepiness, longings,
It has a rabbit allegiance...
without even knowing it does so.ⁱ*

Indeed, every animal is enclosed within its own sensory bubble, and perceives its own tiny sliver of our vast and varied world. There is a great word for this sensory bubble that a German zoologist came up with back in 1909. The word is *Umwelt*. It comes from the German word for "environment," but Jakob von Uexküll invented it to mean the unique slice of an animal's surroundings that it can sense and experience—its perceptual world. For instance: (*trigger alert, for any of you who have a strong aversion to ticks*) A tick, as it relentlessly seeks mammalian blood, what do you suppose it cares about? What is a tick's treasure? Is it the sun, the rain, the birds, or butterflies? Not at all. It is seeking *only* body heat, the touch of hair, and the odor of butyric acid that emanates from skin. As Ed Yong wrote in his article, "Our Blinding, Blaring World," in current issue of *The Atlantic*, "It doesn't care about other stimuli, and probably doesn't know they exist."

The truth is, not only mice, rabbits, and ticks have their own *Umwelt*. We do, too. We all have our own limited sensory bubble. Animals and humans are alike in that regard. We may not realize it. Since our *Umwelt* is all we know, we easily mistake it for all there is to know. We jump to assume that everyone sees things, or should see them, the way we do. Here's where humans and animals differ: God has given humans the unique capacity to perceive the *Umwelten* of other species. And through centuries of research, we have learned much about those sensory worlds.

As Yong concludes, "To learn about the rest is a choice. The ability to dip into another *Umwelten* is our greatest sensory skill... a mantis shrimp will never smell the way a dog can, and a dog will never understand what it is like to be a bat. We can never fully do any of these things either, but we are the only species that can try... through our curiosity and imagination, we can try to step into perspectives outside our own. This is a profound gift, which also comes with a heavy responsibility."ⁱⁱⁱ

Yes, friends: God has given us this ability, but how often and to what purpose do we use it? How often do we just hunker down into our own *Umwelt* with our chosen form of cheese? This term, "*Umwelt*" is only little more than a century old, yet I hear in both the angry prophecy from God, written by the prophet Isaiah over 2800 years ago; and from Jesus eight centuries later, the call to claim this gift. That is how we can make the earth a better place to live. The

choice is ours. God has endowed every one of us with the ability to expand our Umwelt. Or not. You can stay in your own narrow personal bubble, or our shared cultural Umwelt where we are conditioned to believe we never have enough. Never enough money, time, control, or power. Yes, the prices of eggs and bacon are eye popping indeed. But that is *not* the kind of treasure Jesus is talking about here. The great news is that Jesus' treasure is inflation proof. The choice is ours: We can center our lives on trying to hoard more in our treasure box. Or we can embrace God's gift to live a life where we hold our possessions, our time, our limited perspectives, loosely. Choosing instead to reassure first and foremost the unfailing, unconditional, abundant, eternal love of Christ.

At VBS this past week, we were "Sailing the High C's" (That's the letter "C") here at FPC along with children and adult volunteers from with Faith Lutheran and Good Shepherd Lutheran. Each day we explored one (sometimes two) "C's" that helped us learn more about God's nature and identity. I have to tell you. I was so heartened by what the children said in our Monday Bible Study. Our "C" that day was about God as Creator. We looked at the first creation story in Genesis 1, and at photographs of both the glories of God's creation: mountains, lakes, rainbows but also images of deforestation, oil spills, and other forms of pollution. Vivid examples of how we as humans have been bad stewards of this earth the Lord has created and given to us to care for. When the children were asked *why* we humans have caused pollution and destruction of the earth's ecosystem. One of them said, "greed." Another said, "We want everything for ourselves and don't think about other people or about the animals or the ocean. If we did, we wouldn't be messing it up for everyone else." They get it! Hearing this out of the mouths of grade school children, gives me hope.

Jesus came to show us a better way. A way to choose the unfailing, abundant and eternal treasure that would make the earth a better place for all of us to live. Yes, this world which God so loved, that we were given God's son Jesus, to help us see what Isaiah and the prophets were trying to tell us. Jesus' way calls us to cross over, to go beyond our own little Umwelt. We are not mice or rabbits or ticks. We are humans, created by God with the ability to "go beyond the mind we have," Marcus Borg's wonderful definition of repentance. Yes, to repent of our sins, personal and social, is to "go beyond the mind we have." We can do this. We are not trapped in our rabbit brain, or as Buddhists call it so aptly, our "monkey mind."

Speaking of sin, I assure you that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, were *not* homosexuality. To interpret that story in Genesis 19 that way is actually unbiblical. Today's Isaiah text is one of the passages that teaches us this truth. We find the same interpretation in Ezekiel, where our prophets spell out the biblical understanding of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. They are very bad indeed. What are they? Pride, greed, and inhospitable indifference (and even abuse) of those on the margins. That's what ticked off God in our first reading, and what Jesus was teaching his "Little Flock" of thousands to be freed from. Our children at VBS are getting the message, are we?

Here's the good news: Whatever our sins, personal and social, may be, at this Table, through the grace of Christ, we can be reset, reframed, reformed, and set free. Did you know

that Jesus loved tables? In the gospels you read again and again about him eating with disciples, and tax collectors, sinners of all sorts. He also made up a lot of parables that involved tables, like in our story today. The master returns from the wedding banquet, fastens his belt, and serves the slaves a predawn breakfast. It's about a master and his slaves at a table who does something absolutely shocking. Arriving in the middle of the night, famished and tired, the master fastens his belt, seats the slaves, gets up and serves *them*. What? How can this be? This is a parable Jesus tells the crowds as he is on his way to Jerusalem. When he gets there, at the Last Supper with the disciples, Jesus will literally do this. Our Lord Jesus will take off his outer robe and wash his disciples' feet. "This is what Love looks like in my kingdom," says Jesus. While at Table, he showed them with his body, with water and a towel what Jesus' love calls us to do.

Right here at this Table, we can turn the tables. Thanks to Jesus! For the scientifically minded among you, consider this a laboratory table where we can experiment with expanding our Umwelts. The Table where we can let go of the cheese that may be clogging the spiritual arteries of our hearts. God has given us the freedom to cease doing evil, to sell the possessions that are doing us damage, and choose anew, where we place our hearts. We can reset and recalibrate. With God's help we can even cross what seem like uncrossable divides.

We are not mice, rabbits or ticks. We humans are given choices. And our choices have huge consequences. Wherever we choose to invest our money, our time, our hearts, that is where we elect to live. Think for a moment, what is in *your* treasure box, really? That is where you are living. Whatever is in your box today, you always have the choice to expand your Umwelt by doing what Jesus told them that day, "Sell your possessions, and give alms." This is not a literal directive. This is a wake-up call to a spiritual shift of axis, to dilate our perspective and our hearts. To keep our lamps lit and go beyond the mind we have.

God chose us, God *became* us in the form of a Jewish carpenter 2000 years ago to show us what love looks like. To teach us how we can make the earth a better place to live. Today, Jesus is knocking on the door of your heart. Can you hear him?

ⁱ Jane Hirshfield, "The One Not Chosen," *The Beauty: Poems*, (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, NY, 2015), p. 74-75 (excerpt).

ⁱⁱ Ed Yong, "Our Blinding, Blaring World," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2022, p. 65, 74.