

New Day, New Words
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
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November 17, 2013
Luke 21.5-19
Isaiah 65.17-25

It has been 17 days now since the journey began. After months of talking and dreaming, weeks of planning and arranging, and days of sad farewells, I arrived in New Orleans with my children two weeks ago this afternoon, and Nathan joined us (like Noah, with a car full of animals) one week ago this evening. We are here...in this new place. The weeks of preparation to carefully wrap and pack the largest and smallest items of our Richmond home have led to weeks of rapidly unpacking, unwrapping, and somehow—methodically, daily—arranging the contents of one life in the setting of another.

“Being surrounded by boxes is an adventure,” I continued to tell the children and myself...for a day or two. But the inability to put your hand on that certain book or the washcloths for the kids' bath or the coffee maker starts to make one weary. Starting a new life certainly is an adventure, but it is also a challenge because we still carry the old life in us. Our minds and even our hearts carry maps of how things should be while learning how things are.

The in-between transition time from old life to new life is a challenge. We are together. This has happened! My family is no longer bidding farewell to dear friends, we are embracing you as you welcome us so dearly. The pastor search committee is off on a cruise somewhere, relieved to have brought us all to this day after a long, long year. We've arrived...but we're in the in-between. You and I, we are still holding our hope for what might be in this place. We are still imagining the things God will do here. We are setting up a new life in this sacred space where 115 years of life have already taken place—the banner on this corner just beyond the sanctuary reads “Historic Church, New Era”. We carry our history with us into a new day. That is an inspiring statement but a challenging reality, and our scripture texts this morning point to both the certainty and the uncertainty of God's re-creating work.

Life is hard to explain when we are bogged by major change or crisis. Whether the joyous arrival of a new child or the unexpected loss of a spouse, the minutiae of those days combined with the heightened emotion can be too much to process and comprehend. Our texts from Isaiah and Luke are both addressing major transition to their audiences, and they use dramatic language to do so. For us modern listeners, we

may do well to invite our own poet in to speak in imagery of our day. Wendell Berry will guide us in three poems...

With beauty, warmth, and gentle insight, Berry articulates the tension between days past and days present in his essays, fiction, and poetry. The first of three poems this morning, "A Country Funeral," speaks to the transition between eras—the mystery of new life connected to old:

A Country Funeral (Wendell Berry)

an excerpt

Now the old ways that have brought us
farther than we remember sink out of sight
as under the treading of many strangers
ignorant of landmarks. Only once in a while
they are cast clear again upon the mind
as at a country funeral were, amid the soft
lights and hothouse flowers, the expensive
solemnity of experts, notes of a polite musician,
persist the usages of the old neighborhood.

But our memory of ourselves, hard earned,
is one of the land's seeds, as a seed
is the memory of the life of its kind in its place,
to pass on into life the knowledge
of what has died. What we owe the future
is not a new start, for we can only begin
with what has happened. We owe the future
the past, the long knowledge
that is the potency of time to come.
That makes of a man's grave a rich furrow.
The community of knowing in common is the seed
of our life in this place. There is not only
no better possibility, there is no
other, except for chaos and darkness,
the terrible ground of the only possible
new start. And so as the old die and the young
depart, where shall a man go who keeps
the memories of the dead, except home

again, as one would go back after a burial,
faithful to the fields, lest the dead die
a second and more final death.

The community of knowing in common is the seed of our life in this place.

To begin to dream with God of a new day does not mean we become different people—our best, perfect, well-polished selves showing off for one another. No, we begin the new by carrying the fullness of the old with us: old stories, old knowledge, wisdom and laughter. The new day will forever have its roots in the old.

We have two texts before us this morning—Isaiah and Luke—of new life supplanting old life. When I was last with you, Jeremiah told the exiles to stay put and make home in Babylon. Now Isaiah is writing at the end of the Babylonian exile, and Jerusalem will soon be restored because, the prophet tells us, God delights in God's people. God delights in God's people not because they have always worshiped well or lived faithfully but because they belong to God and this is who God is. Here God puts away the former troubles and creates a new thing.

Just as the poet of Genesis tells us of the breathing, creating God hovering over nothingness to speak life into being, God in Isaiah will one day create a new world without suffering, without abbreviated life, starvation, or poverty. This new day builds on the old one but leaves the worst of human sinfulness and unfaithfulness behind to be remembered no more.

This Divine Forgetfulness is a life practice we'd do well to take on, and we hear of a forgetting and releasing ritual in a second poem, "A Purification." Berry speaks this time of marking transitions as he moves into a new season of life, leaving the trespasses of an old season behind.

A Purification (Wendell Berry)

At start of spring I open a trench
in the ground. I put into it
the winter's accumulation of paper,
pages I do not want to read
again, useless words, fragments,
errors. And I put into it
the contents of the outhouse:

light of the sun, growth of the ground,
finished with one of their journeys.
To the sky, to the wind, then,
and to the faithful trees, I confess
my sins: that I have not been happy
enough, considering my good luck;
have listened to too much noise;
have been inattentive to wonders;
have lusted after praise.
And then upon the gathered refuse
of mind and body, I close the trench,
folding shut again the dark,
the deathless earth. Beneath that seal
the old escapes into the new.

To begin to dream with God of a new day—the kind of radically new day that makes the stuff of earth reflect all that is in heaven—we must name and repent of the brokenness of our past and then leave it there.

Next, Luke takes us to the frightening place of apocalypse. What a place to start in our new life together and our celebration of this beloved church! Crumbling temple, warring nations, earthquakes, famines, plagues, rejection from family, faith and conspiring empire, and a new world coming someday but not yet. It is a terrifying and unpleasant scene. We favor life's pleasantries, so these passages tend to be roundly ignored by us civilized folks.

But these wild, destructive, revelatory scenes in scripture serve to explain a certain time in such a way that hearers would know that God is at work amidst the least hopeful of circumstances. Even now, when we attempt to explain the difficult or seemingly unexplainable, we grasp at metaphor and symbol and even hyperbole.

The language of apocalyptic literature is easily misunderstood either as crazed fantasy to be roundly dismissed or as literal instructions to watch for and anticipate. Fred Craddock reminds us that Jesus' wild and dramatic language here serves a purpose of clarification: “what is going on is mixed with what is *really* going on, history being set in the larger context of God's purpose.” (*Interpretation*: Luke, p. 243)

Jesus' tirade about the end of all things was sparked “when some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.” Jesus' response was to point to the edifice and say, “This life you see is not the real life. This will all be gone. Don't even try to prepare yourselves for what is to come because you cannot fathom what God is doing. But I will give you words and wisdom for that day.”

Much like God in Isaiah forgetting the sins of the past and looking toward restoration in the future, Jesus in Luke sees a time when injustice will be eradicated, annihilated, and then replaced with a new way that reflects the values of the kingdom of God.

He is not caught up on specifics of when these things will happen or what that new life will look like. Jesus wants his followers to tell stories of how they have experienced God. Testify! In the midst of upheaval and chaos from the old life to the new one, you will be given an opportunity to testify. And if you fear you have nothing to say about who God is and what God has done, who God is and what God is doing, who God is and what God will do one day—worry not because new words will be given to you. God's wisdom will be with you.

The transition from an old day to a new one may be frightening and unclear at times, but God is present in the midst of this cosmic transition. What we need for this new day is tied not to a space but to a communal experience of God's story.

In our final poem of the morning, “The Sycamore”, we hear of a body that endures.

The Sycamore (Wendell Berry)

In the place that is my own place, whose earth
I am shaped in and must bear, there is an old tree growing,
a great sycamore that is a wondrous healer of itself.
Fences have been tied to it, nails driven into it,
hacks and whittles cut in it, the lightning has burned it.
There is no year it has flourished in
that has not harmed it. There is a hollow in it
that is its death, though its living brims whitely
at the lip of the darkness and flows outward.
Over all its scars has come the seamless white
of the bark. It bears the gnarls of its history
healed over. It has risen to a strange perfection

in the warp and bending of its long growth.
It has gathered all accidents into its purpose.
It has become the intention and radiance of its dark fate.
It is a fact, sublime, mystical and unassailable.
In all the country there is no other like it.
I recognize in it a principle, an indwelling
the same as itself, and greater, that I would be ruled by.
I see that it stands in its place, and feeds upon it,
and is fed upon, and is native, and maker.

To begin to dream with God of a new day, we must rise to a strange perfection in the warp and bending of our long growth. We must gather accidents into purpose. All of that is to say, we must be our perfectly imperfect selves together, for God's sake. We must begin to understand our faith community as a living thing that exists because God breathes words and wisdom into it.

How then must we prepare for this new era?
With reflection on and gratitude for the past.
With healthy self-reflection to know what is no longer ours to carry.
With awareness of just how it is that we experience God daily.
And with abundant prayers thanking God for this present moment and seeking God's guidance for tomorrow.

What stories, legacies, wisdom, and truth do you carry with you?
What past hurts and mistakes need to be buried in the soil with the compost to be made new?
What testimony from this place speaks to the truth of who God is and the work God is about?

Reflect on these things in the days and weeks to come as we prepare our hearts together for this new day. Let us pray.

O God, in your mystery and quiet work, you are gently at work within us. Do not give up on our stubborn, distracted selves. Continue to prune, refine, purify. Our hope is in you alone. Carry us with you into the new thing you are doing in this neighborhood, in this city, and throughout the world. Amen.