

## **Many Hands, Small Acts (We're Smarter than This!)**

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 – Jeremiah affirms the ongoing nature of God's work

Luke 16:19-31 – Jesus affirms the continuity of his movement with the prophets

An accountant dies and goes to heaven. He reaches the Pearly Gates and is amazed to see a happy crowd all waving banners and chanting his name. After a few minutes St. Peter comes running over and says, "I'm sorry I wasn't here to greet you personally. God is looking forward to meeting such a remarkable man."

The accountant is perplexed. "I've tried to lead a good life, but I am overwhelmed by your welcome," he tells St. Peter.

"It's the least we can do for someone as special as you are. Imagine, living to the age of 160 and still looking so young," says St. Peter. The man looks even more dumbfounded and replies, "160? I don't know what you mean. I'm only 40."

"But that can't be right," replies St. Peter "we've seen your time sheets!"

Apologies to any accountants present! I tell this joke not to pick on you, but to remind us all that understanding a story depends on shared cultural references. When I start talking about the pearly gates and St Peter, many of you understood the set up – trying to get into heaven. Hopefully by the end of it, whether or not you thought it was funny, everyone knew that I was telling a joke, not making a serious commentary on what happens after death.

In the same way, when we hear this parable of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Luke, I think that the story format would have been familiar to his audience. My reading focuses on the core meaning that I hear, but I want to acknowledge how uncomfortable and distressing this story of torment after death can be. It is a strange parable – it includes a named character, it has no representation of God, and describes conscious human life after death, unlike other Scripture passages.

I feel confident that Jesus is not trying to describe what happens after death. We can take this parable seriously without taking it literally. Taking it literally would mean missing the significance of the parable's message for us.

"If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead"

I don't exactly know what to do with the name of Lazarus in this parable of Jesus, both names that we associate with coming back from the dead. But I do strongly connect with the painful truth that not everyone will listen to God's warning messages.

Jesus connects his mission and message with the ancient and ongoing traditions of ethical teaching and prophetic witness. And he says that some people are simply too weighed down with their riches, too busy with their feasting, to pay attention.

This sounds familiar to me. We know that the rich and powerful have an easy time ignoring the impoverished and disempowered. Individual acts of compassion or charity have little impact.

After all, in the closed universe of this short story, when the rich man finally feels compassion, it is for his own brothers, who are as rich and closed off to the needs of the world as he was. He doesn't feel compassion for the life of Lazarus or the countless unnamed suffering and impoverished people. He doesn't admit that his way of life is wrong, only that it leads to a bad end. So the object of his compassion is really himself. He proposes that Lazarus can warn his brothers. But why would his brothers pay attention? If Lazarus comes back from the dead he's just going to be a poor man outside the mansion gates of the five brothers. The chasm between the rich and the poor is just as visible in the world of the living.

So Abraham says, no. You have already been taught everything that you need to know. It is up to you if you choose not to act. This is the painful truth – not everyone will listen. And God will allow us to not listen.

This sounds familiar to me. We've known forever that actions have consequences. We've known for millennia that power structures consume until they collapse. We've known for generations what a capitalist model of infinite growth on an explicitly finite planet would lead to. We've known for years that climate change is accelerating towards a point of no return.

Indigenous communities have been warning Settler society. The more-than-human community has been warning the human beings. The Holy Spirit has raised up prophets in all nations.

When I look at the destruction of habitat, the extinction of life, the poisoning of water, desertification and deforestation, the sprawl of cities and the resurgence of epidemics, I think, what more evidence do we need? If this isn't enough, what would be?

Hidden away in the deleted scenes of the 2005 movie Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith is a sequence where the Jedi are caught in a trap. Obi-Wan Kenobi looks around and exclaims ["Wait a minute! How did this happen? We're smarter than this!"](#)

We are smarter than this. And yet, here we are, in the trap.

I spent ten days of this summer in close proximity to a group of Jewish and Christian people visiting Indigenous communities in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Kenora, Ontario, and Grassy Narrows First Nation. We slept in church basements and on the floor of community centres and spent our days learning from Indigenous leaders, activists, and historians, from settler allies and academics, and from each other's stories and sacred traditions.

One feature of these solidarity delegations is time at Slant Lake, on a spot of land beside the old logging road that passes beside the reserve. A few cabins cluster up from the lake where there is sometimes a good breeze to blow the mosquitos away. A tipi sits over the site of the sacred fire, and nearby seating is arranged around a cooking fire. Some of the plywood sheds and outhouses dotted around are sagging under the weight of years, while the more solidly-log-built cabins are carefully maintained and stocked with cooking equipment and supplies for making tea.

Here in midwinter, 2002, a pair of teenage girls from Grassy Narrows borrowed a chainsaw and cut down trees to block the road, unofficially beginning the long-planned blockade and calling the community to take action to defend their territory against destruction. Since the beginning of time the Anishinabeg have hunted and trapped throughout the Weskeejick forest, collecting medicines and berries, travelling far and wide and gathering annually. They negotiated and signed Treaty #3, ensuring that the junior Canadian nation would respect their activities forever.

The mechanization of logging, the demand for paper products, and the passage of time changed the way that the Canadian state interpreted this treaty, and Grassy Narrows was one of many nations that saw the devastating effect of clearcut logging on their traplines. After years of fruitless appeals to the government of Ontario and Canada, with continual grinding of of ecosystem into profit all the while, it was time for action.

For several years the Christian Peacemaker Teams accompanied this nonviolent direct action. For fifteen years since we have brought short term peacemaker delegations to spend a few days, learn something of this history, and strategize how to build and maintain relationships of solidarity to support Grassy Narrows in their demands for justice.

So this spot close to the reserve is one that I have spent a lot of time at, over the years. And there I was again, with my ragtag delegation of Jews and Christians, come to work out what decolonization might mean, what might be gained from bringing our bodies and spirits to that place of resistance.

So what principled and practical action did we take to tackle settler-colonialism?

We cut the grass, hauled logs, and carefully layered tarps on the framework of a monumental wigwam.

Many hands, right? It has been a long time since CPTers needed to stand in front of logging trucks or liaise with police. On the day the community needed the site prepared for the Grassy Narrows Women's Gathering, a crucial event in the empowering and equipping of young Indigenous women. For us, as Christian and Jewish people seeking to be allies to the community, we knew that we were being invited into a long-running story of solidarity, supporting work that goes back to two young women, with a borrowed chainsaw, acting to protect the Weskeejick forest for a generation.

On Friday I ran into several of those delegation members in the Interfaith contingent of the Climate Strike March. I know that several of you were there too – Joel, Layla and Oscar, Leanne, and I think I saw Ezra and Ariane at different times. Did you hear the cheers of thousands of people as Grassy Narrows was mentioned?

I think about those two women who kicked off the Grassy Narrows Blockade. And I think about all the people that have come to Slant Lake over the years, because they took action one freezing December night, as the clearcuts came closer and closer.

I want to lift up four names. Perhaps you have heard of them?

- Autumn Peltier, water protector and now 14 year old chief water commissioner for the Anisinabeg Nation
- Isra Hirsi, 16, the co-founder of the Youth Climate Strike in the USA.
- Xiuhtezcatl (Zoo-tez-catul) Martinez, 18 years old Earth Guardian Youth Director, hip-hop artists and indigenous climate activist
- And Greta Thunberg, the 16 year old Swedish environmental activist who inspired the Fridays for Future climate strike movement.

These young women are taking action. They are calling out and speaking up. After all, what else do you do when the world is ending?

Do you remember the story about the prophet Jeremiah that we heard earlier? Jeremiah's world was ending. The Babylonian armies were surrounding Jerusalem, intent on its destruction and the humiliation of its leaders. No miracle was forthcoming. God had not rescued Jerusalem. And Jeremiah was locked up in prison. Why was he in prison? Because he had been upsetting everyone by warning them about the Babylonians. I am sure that he would rather have just been wrong.

But before the attack comes, and before the armies of Babylon do what armies always do to enemy cities, Jeremiah gets a visit from his cousin, who wants to sell him a piece of land. Seriously?

Trying to sell a piece of land to the one person in all Jerusalem who is literally in prison because he refused to stop saying that the Babylonians are going to conquer Jerusalem. Clearly, Hanamel is just trying to get some quick cash to try and bribe his way past enemy lines or buy some siege-priced food. If I was Jeremiah, I'd either just give him the money, or, depending on how much I liked my cousin, I'd laugh in his face and tell him he should have listened to me earlier.

But Jeremiah takes the opportunity that God has brought to him for another prophetic act. He calls together the prisoners and guards and conducts the property exchange, paying the money he has and making sure that everything is done legally. And then he instructs Baruch to go and bury the deeds.

As I was preparing for this sermon a friend sent me an article from Canadian Mennonite ['Faithful Practices on a Dying Planet'](#) by Gerald Ens. I suggest that you take a look at it when you get a chance. Ens offers four practices that the church can focus on: Hospitality, Befriending Death, Lament, and Trust, and he uses this story of Jeremiah's land purchase to talk about trust.

How can we act in a time of Climate crisis? What does it mean to plan for a family, or learn a trade, or plant a tree in a time when the world itself is shaking under the weight of imperial violence? We know all this – like the five rich brothers, we are not ignorant.

I'm going to ask you to take a moment of silence to consider, and then ask you to speak briefly with a neighbour.

- What is a specific fear that you have for the next few years?

- How can you share that fear with God in an act of lament and trust?  
(repeat questions)

Take a moment to consider. (30 seconds)

Now, share your thoughts with your neighbour, and give them space to share with you. What is something you fear, and what is a way that you can respond to God. (90 seconds)

Friends, thank you for sharing. This should not be the only time that we can have these conversations. I've been thinking a lot about the need for despair and lamentation. This Easter I marked Holy Saturday with a Mennonite Watershed Discipleship group in Kitchener Waterloo, lamenting the destruction of ecosystems and species as we contemplated the murder of Jesus and the hiding of his body. This November we'll be revisiting these themes in a retreat called Grounding: Discovering Our Sacred Gifts in Climate Emergency. We'll be looking at how our faith takes us through these times of despair and opens our eyes to what is next.

I believe that times of despair are necessary for the church, because God is calling us to other work that we cannot do on this side of despair.

Jeremiah planted that deed to the land as if it was a seed. He wanted everyone in that prison to know that he was not just a prophet of despair, but of hope. They had rejected the fearful warning that he brought them, the call to lamentation, but God still worked it out so that he would give them this sign of hope. The land would survive and the people would return to it, some day.

Those young women of Grassy Narrows, those young women of many nations, they all looked at the despair that they felt, they acknowledged it, and they took action.

Do you remember those other famous, favourite words of Jeremiah to the exiles – build houses and live in them, plant gardens, have children. We're in it for the long haul.

It is true. Something has to happen, and it is us. We are happening now.  
Many hands, part of a world that needs us.