

Sermon by the Rev. Marilyn Zehr and the Rev. Svinda Heinrichs for Toronto United Mennonite Church on Thanksgiving Sunday, the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in the time of Creation, October 10, 2021

### **Svinda**

Good morning! It is so good to be with you this morning and Happy Thanksgiving! Marilyn and I were pleased to find what the lectionary gave us for scripture passages on this Thanksgiving Sunday.

### **Marilyn**

Then after much thought and conversation, we thought the easiest way to write a sermon together was to answer the same questions and then compare notes and go back and forth with our responses.

The first hurdle of course was deciding what questions we were trying to answer. Eventually, we cleared that hurdle and here we go.

### **What's going on in these texts?**

I'll start with Joel.

God speaks through the prophet Joel in approximately 850 BCE – pre-exilic Israel, but well into their settlement in the land of Canaan. By then they'd had kings for about 150 years and were a more or less settled agrarian community having displaced at least some of the Canaanites who had lived there before them. It was then that they experienced a catastrophic locust plague

And The Word of "I Am," came to Joel in response to the plague.

The description of the plague is both poetic and terrifying.

"What the cutting locust left,  
the swarming locust has eaten.

What the swarming locust left,  
the hopping locust has eaten,  
and what the hopping locust left,  
the destroying locust has eaten."

Joel compares the locust plague to an army that not only consumes all grain and fruit and pastures so that animal, human and plant are devastated, but climbs up the city walls and into houses. He also compares the plague to fire, either real or metaphorical, it is not clear.

For fire has devoured  
the pastures of the wilderness,  
and flames have burned  
all the trees of the field.

<sup>20</sup> Even the wild animals cry to you  
because the watercourses are dried up,  
and fire has devoured  
the pastures of the wilderness.

The joy of plant, animal and human has withered with the devastation.

And God calls the people to lament and repent.

"to rend their hearts and not their clothing."

I wondered, what did the locust plague have to do with the people's hearts?

A settled agrarian community and locust plagues? cursory research shows that locust plagues are related to certain agrarian land uses and weather extremes, especially prolonged drought followed by extensive rains. Was there something in the people's settled relationship with the land that led to this plague?

And note, it is not all about the people. The imbalance of the plague destroys everything, fig, apple, grape, pasture, so that all of creation suffers.

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### **Svinda:**

Similarly, in Jesus' time, the Roman occupation came with the constant threat of their destructive methods of subduing the occupied peoples. They did not merely slaughter people, they also burned the olive trees and the surrounding vegetation and homes, and they salted the fields, thereby destroying the land's biome and growing potential, leaving behind only devastation.

The scene in Matthew is the Sermon on Mount - everyone is gathered outside, where Jesus spends most of his ministry. He is just over ½-way through the sermon.

The Sermon on the Mount feels very human-centred until we get to this passage where Jesus talks about lilies and birds, and grass. Here too, I have in the past read it in my human-centred way – “what does this have to do with me and how I can live faithfully?” would be my starting point. The problem with reading in a “human-centric” way is that as humans, we can think that everything is about us and then we can get the idea that “all that is” needs to relate somehow to us humans.

Or maybe that's the way I've been taught to read scripture, that is,  
the Euro-centric context in which I grew up.

Here, I find the Joel passage helpful in discovering another layer.

### **Marilyn**

In Joel, the word of God addresses the soil first, then the animals and then the people. In Joel, yes, the people are to lament and fast and hold a solemn assembly, to “rend their hearts and not their clothing,” and still, the reassuring Word of “I Am” is first to the soil and the animal and then the people, assuring all of creation that one day everything would be healed and restored. This reminds me of Julian of Norwich's All shall be well and every manner of thing shall be well.

And the key to this assurance is that humans are not necessarily the centre of everything.

Reading this passage made me wonder how often in scripture, the Word of God comes to the more than human world and how that part of the world responds? I expect it's more often than we have tended to notice.

If humans are not the centre of the universe than what is? We will get to that.

### **Svinda**

From Joel, I hear that quite apart from me, God tends & cares for all of creation.

Not only that, God and creation communicate with each other.

I assumed the communication was uni-directional: “the heavens tell glory of God” (Ps 19)

Maybe Jesus & those of his time understood /assumed a bi-directional communication.

And so Jesus can use the Book of Creation, that is, what's around them, as object lessons  
(lilies, birds, grass).

Maybe the authors of scripture assumed that God and creation communicate with each other and that notion was lost over time and human hubris.

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How God communicates with humans and how we communicate with G then is merely one method among many.

Oh rats, I always thought we were special!

and we are - just perhaps not in the way we'd imagined

### **Marilyn**

At the end of the passage Jesus says, "seek first the kingdom," and all else will be added unto you. (my childhood KJV comes to mind when I say this verse)

If that is what we are supposed to do, seek first the kingdom, then maybe it is time we look again at the kingdom of God and how we describe and understand it. Could it be that Jesus was trying to point us to the true heart of the universe in his good news kingdom?

In the scripture, Jesus proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God that is already among you. It is already here if we have the eyes and ears and heart to see it.

The theology that I grew up with named Jesus' kingdom as the upside-down kingdom. Where the least will be first and the greatest will be last, but no-where in my theological upbringing and education did that mean anything more than people and social hierarchies.

I now see that that sort of analysis was and is profoundly myopic.

Like Joel says,

Wake up, you drunkards, and weep;

and wail, all you wine-drinkers,  
over the sweet wine,

for it is cut off from your mouth.

We are not the center of anything.

What if the kingdom that Jesus proclaims is truly a kin-dom that first peoples of this land, called "all our relations" and Hildegard von Bingen called *veriditas* or the greening power that animates everything.

Grandfather rock, brother sun, plants that are really our older siblings because they were created long long long (like billions of years) before humans and don't even get me started on the fungal kingdom.

Consider the lilies indeed, Jesus did not come to proclaim an upside-down kingdom, but asked us to look around again and again at the seeds in the ground, the lilies, the birds of the air, the trees of the field. Look, look and look again. If we have more value than any of these things, then that is merely in our own eyes and the authors of texts like this. Rather we are of the same value as all of these things and I find that to be good news.

### **Svinda**

We are special in the ways in which we are able to:

- impact the rest of Creation - for good or ill; and
- modify our behaviour - towards healing, restoration, and cooperation, or not.

We as a species, unlike any other species that has ever existed, have the power to cause with our

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actions and inactions, a mass extinction – last time it took a meteorite to accomplish that! We are special, aren't we.

Some really smart and curious people have been using their God-given specialness to do some very interesting research into the role of play in animals' (including human) lives and development. Dr. Caitlin O'Connell and her research team observe elephants at play. You can read the article in this year's August edition of *Scientific American*.

Susan, matriarch of the Acton elephant family, kicked out Wynona who took her offspring with her to start new clan.

When going to the water hole, Wynona always tried to be there either before or after Susan's clan to avoid trouble.

Researchers believe it was about 2 years since these 2 clans last met at the water hole – by then Wynona had a 2-year-old calf, Lucy.

Unlike her previous calf, Liza, Lucy was outgoing, gregarious.

Liza didn't like to stay far from mom, Lucy loved to meet others.

Tensions were high as Wynona and Susan's clans met at the water hole - then Lucy, who either didn't read the cues or didn't care, ran off to play with the calves of Susan's clan - she did not pay any mind to the other moms in the clan trying to shoo her away as she sought out playmates and had great fun with them - so much so that she wouldn't return when her mom called her - sound familiar moms?

In the end, Wynona followed her calf – she wouldn't or couldn't abandon her child. The two clans reunited - relationships restored – the adults had to get over themselves! – and a child shall lead them. Curiosity and fun is healing. As Dr. O'Connell says, we humans could learn a lot from elephants.

## **Marilyn**

The good news of the Kin-dom of God that we are invited to see by Jesus and more recently by scientists who have allowed themselves to fall in love with their subjects, is the intricate design of the whole created order that exists in elephants, whales and fungi and their relationships. The intricate design and all their relations is the kin-dom. Not just social communities of people. The penny dropped for me when I read the words of Suzanne Simard in her memoir, *The Mother Tree*. She was describing the fungal networks that conduct the nitrogen, carbon and water back and forth among tree roots of the same and different tree species. As well, she describes these networks as functioning in a very similar way to the neuro-networks in our brains. Our bodies are not different from the soil and how it functions. They both host microbes and electrical signals and other networks that communicate. In God's infinite design we are the same – Along side that we are completely symbiotically connected to the trees. We breathe out the carbon they need and they breathe out the oxygen we need to complete an essential cycle. We should no more dominate a tree than we should dominate the blood that runs through our veins. We are essential to each other's survival. Getting this, getting what the whole kin-dom is all about at a heart level is what it means to "rend our hearts, instead of our clothing" **So How do we seek first the kin-dom?**

## **Svinda**

Seeking the Kin-dom of God requires that we look with new eyes and ears – eyes and ears that can

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see and hear that the Kin-dom is here already, as Jesus has told us. We see in the Book of Creation all around us that abundant life has to do less with competition, and much more with cooperation, like between fungi and trees. That thriving has to do with curiosity and fun and restoring relationships.

**Marilyn** [*turn it into grace*]

Indeed, seeking first the kin-dom includes;

1. paying attention to the people who are preaching the good news of the kin-dom. Creator has given us people like Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* – all about reciprocity between the human species and the gifts of Creator; Diana Beresford-Kroeger *To Speak for the Trees*, combines science and Celtic wisdom; Suzanne Simard, in *The Mother Tree*; and Alexandra Morton, *Not on My Watch*. All of them are scientists who have combined their rigorous science unapologetically with their love for their particular part of the world.
2. God speaks through prophets of our time like these scientists and including our friend and Wild Church Network founder, Victoria Looz who says: Go ahead and fall in love with a particular place and all its inhabitants.” And I put it this way, “Consider the lilies but not just any lily or all lilies, but the one lily in your garden or on your windowsill. Consider the birds of the air, but not just any bird or all birds but instead the one bird who nests under your eaves. Consider the grass and trees but not any grass or all trees but the one tree that grows in your backyard or on your street or the small forest you encounter as part of your daily walk.  
Falling in love with the particular others in your part of the kin-dom means hanging out with, observing, talking to, listening to, or even mourning the loss of, if necessary. Only then will we rend our hearts. Victoria would say, “Let your hearts be broken by love.”

**Svinda**

Marilyn and I are lucky, blessed, and grateful to live in a place, surrounded by forest and field, where we can easily fall in love with those “particulars” who reach out to us. As we walk in the fields and through the forests we can stop and marvel at a mushroom – that it is a fruiting body of a vast and ancient network just below the surface that we now know provides/is the “brain” of communication and conveyor of nutrients between the trees standing around us. We get to fall in love over and over again.

This is the love that is available to all. It is the Love that lets us see and hear and know that the Kin-dom of God is here. It is in and within the relationships of God’s Creation. It is the web of life, of which we are a part. When we know that we live in this Kin-dom we can worry less and be joyful, we can be curious and playful, and our relationships with the rest of the web of life can be healed and restored.

For God promised in Joel and in Jesus to restore the soil, the animals, the pasture, and us.

For this we can be profoundly grateful on this Thanksgiving Sunday.

May it be so.