

Green Blades Preaching Roundtable
Reflection for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year C | March 20, 2022
Isaiah 55:1-9 | Psalm 63:1-8 | 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 | Luke 13:1-9

As I write this review, I have also been enjoying Robert Farrar Capon's book, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*. Today as we open the scriptures to these words from Isaiah 55, what a fitting reminder Fr. Capon makes when he writes: "We were given appetites, not to consume the world and forget it, but to taste its goodness and hunger to make it great."¹ The prophet welcomes us to the smörgåsbord of grace: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!" The invitation is as unmistakably clear as it is absolutely unbelievable.

It had been nearly forty years since the people had been taken into captivity following the Babylonian destruction of Judea. Now they hear Isaiah's words: "Buy wine and milk and bread ... eat what is good ... delight in rich food" as they consider their present surroundings. In their condition and with their provisions as slaves in a foreign land, we can understand why they would be skeptical of Isaiah's invitation. Can they truly believe that God still claims them as God's own, that God even remembers them a generation removed, never mind that God is preparing a home-coming feast for them?

In some ways, those of us entrusted with preaching share not only a similar calling with Isaiah to proclaim the word of the Lord, but we also share similar audiences. Our message can be a call to hope, an invitation to the feast, an unconditional proclamation of the grace of God. Or the message might be a call to repentance, an exhortation, to a community as small as a local congregation or as large as the world itself, urging people to accept and address the climate crisis and its implications for the interconnected ecosystems of this planet. This message is often met with the same disregard, skepticism, or disbelief the captives in Babylon had for Isaiah.

We have all encountered climate change deniers or skeptics who choose to believe that the message is false, and that the science itself does not support the claims of global warming and its impending effects. They've been around for a long time, and now it seems they're keeping company with the anti-vaxxers and those who refuse to believe there is a global pandemic. This is a difficult audience, for sure. Many of us have decided to "agree to disagree" with these neighbors, believing any effort to convince them otherwise would be a waste of our own time and energy.

Consider Greta Thunberg, the nineteen-year-old Swedish environmental activist. She has addressed the nations regarding the immediate dangers of climate change. She calls world leaders to task for neglecting to act sufficiently, or at all, on the issue. As waters and temperatures rise, as drought and famine and literal fires sweep across the world, Greta proclaims, "Our house is on fire."² And in response, the science deniers tell her to "chill" and "go to a good old fashioned movie."³

In fact, in a recent and popular movie, *Don't Look Up*,⁴ this very issue was highlighted. As a comet, large enough to cause worldwide extinction, comes speeding towards the earth, the scientists pleading for help are met with complete indifference by the government, media, and most

everyone else. The response to the impending destruction of the world in this Netflix film is mirrored in our current skepticism and non-response to the realities of our own, real global crisis.

It seems we don't want to hear the message, because hearing it would require something of a response. And any honest response would cause us at the least some inconvenience, if not a major disruption to our way of life, and in every aspect of it: energy production and consumption, agriculture, transportation, housing, immigration, etc.. Perhaps we have become a people so divided by our competing appetites for the world's resources that we're uncomfortable with even the idea of sacrifice for the common good? Or are we too comfortable in our own situations to deal with the complexities and responsibilities that come with living together on earth, our common home?

This is the other side of climate change skepticism: there is a much larger group of people who do know and accept the facts of climate change but who do little or nothing to address the problem. Admittedly, many well-meaning people belong to this group, though we would not label ourselves, nor appreciate being labeled, deniers or skeptics.

Yet, whether it's born of inconvenience or inconsideration; a sheer sense of powerlessness – that there is too much to do, or too little time, to make any lasting or effective change; or anxiety about even raising the topic for fear of causing discontent in our communities and congregations where these topics are too often associated with unwelcomed liberal politics, we admit that we have done little to address this situation in changing our own personal attitudes, adjusting our household behaviors, or refocusing the priorities and practices of our local communities, including our congregations.

What does the preacher do? What can you do when the good, rich food is laid out, the feast is spread, and the invitations have been sent, and those who receive them cannot, will not, accept? If we share this similar calling with Isaiah, perhaps we might choose to also do what Isaiah does: repeat the message, keep proclaiming, send the invitation out again and again. In time, the skeptic may come to be convinced, and even the unbeliever might believe. With so much at stake, Isaiah, like Greta Thunberg, inspires us to persist, undeterred from the task at hand. If this was only our message about our own agenda, we might tire of it, or give it up entirely, but we are reminded that this is the word of God concerning the work of God.

Isn't this, in part at least, what Jesus tells us in his parable: 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it' (Lk. 13:8)? Not just keep at it, Jesus tells us, but give it time. Allow for grace. There was a time, after all, when this message was new to us, as well; when it was difficult to believe, or easier to disregard than to address, or too much to bear, too complex to understand. And yet, if *we* have come to repent, in the true sense of the word, and found our way to the table of wine and milk and bread, is there not hope for our neighbor? With some more time, with some manure, could the barren fig tree not produce its fruit? When we hear the message, will we not grow weary of our skepticism, and finally, hungering for a taste of hope, risk gathering together at the feast – if only to see if it's real?

In this springtime of the year, this season of new life, we might be courageous and persistent, not only in declaring the word of the Lord, but in hearing it for ourselves: "Incline your ear, and come

to me; listen, so that you may live” (Is. 55:3). Here in the middle of Lent, Jesus gives us time to become again what God has created us and called us to be. Consider how today’s scripture readings invite us to renew our own baptismal identities:

We might think of ourselves as the fig tree in the parable, struggling to do what is expected of us, and seemingly out of place (a lone fig tree in a vineyard), but glad to have a mediator who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We might find ourselves sympathetic to that role, becoming mediators for God’s creation and creatures, digging and fertilizing against the odds.

And is it very difficult to place ourselves among the captives of Babylon, recognizing, confessing, and repenting of our false gods, our prejudices and biases, our self-indulgent appetites? In that same act of confession, are we not humbled by God’s response of unconditional forgiveness and promise of new life? All of it moves us to recognize that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are God’s ways our ways (Is. 55:8) and to praise God for the gift of it all. +

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In preparation for the liturgies of Lent, and specifically Lent 3 C, these hymns from *All Creation Sings*⁵ may help bring focus to the theme of listening and responding to God’s word as it comes to challenge our biases, bring wisdom to our confusion, and urge us to seek beauty and truth over indifference and apathy.

Come to the Water of Life – ACS 955

*All who are thirsty for beauty, all who are thirsty for truth;
all who are thirsty for truth, for beauty, come: come to the Water of life. (verse 3)*

Listen to the Word – ACS 974

*Listen to the word that God has spoken; listen to the One who is close at hand;
listen to the voice that began creation; listen even if you don’t understand.*

Ask the Complicated Questions – ACS 1005

*Seek the disconcerting answers, follow where the Spirit blows;
test competing truths for wisdom, for in tension new life grows. (verse 2)*

As an alternate to the prayer of the day appointed for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year C in the ELW⁶, this prayer follows the fifth reading of the Easter Vigil (Isaiah 55) and relates more specifically to today’s first reading and the theme of creation care:

Holy God,
you created all things by the power of your Word,
and you renew the whole earth by your Spirit.
Give now the water of life to all who thirst for you,
that, rejoicing in your covenant of mercy,
we may bring forth abundant fruit,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Included here are the “Prayers of the People Celebrating God in Creation Form 3 (on the theme of water)” from *The Book of Occasional Services 2018*, pages 298-300 (The Episcopal Church):⁷

The silence after each bidding may be followed by an appropriate response, such as “Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.”

In the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters.
The water that God called into being is at the heart of all that lives.
Mindful of the many ways water affects our lives,
let us pray for our waters and for the life of the world around us. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for all people of faith,
and for the transformations in their lives that are marked by the sacredness of water:
at the Red Sea, in the Jordan River,
in ritual baths, in the washing of feet, and in Holy Baptism. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for the leaders of nations, corporations, and communities around the world,
that they may exercise wise stewardship over the waters of their lands,
so that all people may have clean water to drink
and may live free from waterborne diseases. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for the wisdom to shape creative solutions
to conflicts over water in the dry places of our planet,
and for justice and peace in desert lands. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for all the waters of the earth: for oceans and seas, for rivers and streams,
for lakes and ponds, for watersheds, marshes, and swamps, for the waters beneath the ground;
and for all creatures that live in the waters of the earth. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for all who travel or work at sea or on inland waterways. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for all afflicted with too much water in flood or tsunami, storm or ice;
and for those people and creatures who suffer as glaciers and ice floes melt and shrink. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for all who have died and for all who mourn,
that their tears of grief may be turned to wellsprings of joy. *Silence*

Blessed God, fountain of life:
Grant that we may see all water as holy,
and so protect and preserve the waters of the earth and the life they sustain.
In the name of Christ, the living water, we pray. Amen.

¹Capon, Robert Farrar: *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*, p 189; ²Thunberg, Greta: Address at World Economic Forum: “Our House Is On Fire,” Jan. 25, 2019; ³Trump, Donald: “So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!” – Twitter (@realDonaldTrump) December 12, 2019; ⁴*Don’t Look Up*, Hyperobject Industries, distr. by Netflix, 2021; ⁵*All Creation Sings*, © 2020 Augsburg Fortress; ⁶*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, © 2006 Augsburg Fortress; ⁷*The Book of Occasional Services 2018*, available as a free download from the publications page of the General Convention website: www.generalconvention.org/publications#liturgy.