



“TASTE AND BE”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 65: 17-25; LUKE 21: 5-19
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
November 16, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Isaiah 65:17-25

65:17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

65:18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

65:19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

65:20 No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

65:21 They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

65:22 They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

65:23 They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD-- and their descendants as well.

65:24 Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

65:25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent--its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

Luke 21:5-19

21:5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said,

21:6 "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

21:7 They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

21:8 And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

21:9 "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."

21:10 Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;

21:11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

21:12 "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

21:13 This will give you an opportunity to testify.

21:14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance;

21:15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

21:16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death.

21:17 You will be hated by all because of my name.

21:18 But not a hair of your head will perish.

21:19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

How has following Jesus impacted the way you have lived your life the last 72 hours?

Don't think too hard, but let's be as specific as we can.

(Get answers from congregation)

Where in the last three days have I done something I wouldn't have had the courage to do without Jesus going before me?

On Thursday I attended a Faith 4 Justice meeting and talked about what I am willing to risk to disrupt the lies that white supremacy has used the church to tell. It is Jesus who gives me the courage to say, I am coming to terms with the fact that I need to be willing to risk everything—my livelihood, my relationships, my sense of place and purpose in the world, maybe even my life.

Another question for us to ponder: what have we **not** done in the last 72 hours that a Jesus follower should do? Where have we hesitated or resisted or ignored and denied the way Jesus is calling us?

Pretty much every one of the last three days I have avoided listening, watching, or reading much about the impeachment hearings. Is it being true to Jesus's prophetic example for me to disengage because something is uncomfortable or upsetting?

On Saturday, in the interest of time and to save myself some hassle I ordered stuff from amazon—and the stuff I ordered is plastic and probably made in a factory that creates toxic waste in its production. Otherwise I am sure it wouldn't have been as affordable as it was.

No, Jesus didn't have Amazon.com to contend with, but he also never said, follow me except for when it puts you out or creates an inconvenience.

The challenge of this faith tradition we claim as our own is that it's not just about thinking and doing, it's about being.

Jesus following isn't just a series of isolated decisions we make or actions we do. Jesus following is about who we are.

And the question that may be the hardest for communities like ours to ask ourselves—that is communities formed and fed by normativity and social acceptability and fitting in so seamlessly with mainstream culture, formed and fed by the kind of competencies that lead to successful lives and access to power and a certain level of comfort in this world.

Is the way we live together doing anything to heal the world? Or are we just another example of the status quo. (at least I didn't say quid pro quo)

A community of Jesus followers living differently should be making an impact—should be building a new culture, a new way of being in the world.

The Gospel writer of Luke wants to drive the point home—Jesus is a truth teller and he knows us better than we know ourselves. Following Him changes the way you live in the world.

Jesus is speaking inside the temple about the destruction of the temple. The institutions, the concreteness of the institutions that defined the religious culture of that community, will disappear, Jesus says. Piety is not about a building or structure, but about a community's disposition in the world.

Jesus tells his followers not to be terrified by all the tumult and cataclysm around them. He tells them that their ability to endure those things will be what will gain them their souls.

I wonder what can save our collective souls in our epoch of cultural upheaval? Where is our Jesus-given, Jesus-driven endurance?

Isaiah is speaking to a post-exile community in these last chapters of that poetic book. They have returned from the wilderness and been restored to sense of place, but they are still struggling to line up the way they live with the God they worship and serve.

The power of this poetry only comes through when you take in what the people of Israel had endured. Genocide, colonization, their land and homes being stolen from them, hunger, murder of their children, state sanctioned slavery, the destruction of their sacred spaces.

The people of Israel didn't just endure some inconveniences because of their faith or people having soccer tournaments on the Sabbath. They endured a violent attempt to destroy their culture, to shatter their beliefs, to fracture their families and annihilate their way of life.

Think along the lines of what white Northern European culture and people did to indigenous people on this land.

In Isaiah the restored people are invited to envision a world healed—a world where they no longer feel unsafe in their own homes, a world where they get to live in the homes they built and no one will take them, a world where they get to eat the food they plant without someone stealing it or telling them it's not theirs, a world where they enjoy the fruits of their own work and no one will exploit them or commodify them.

Such sacred and holy imagination doesn't come easy especially for a traumatized society. Why should they trust a vision as counter to the world they have known?

This past Friday, ecological theologian, Sallie McFague, died at the age of 86. She dedicated her life to centering the earth and the environment in her constructive theological work. She is one of the mothers of feminist and ecological theology in Western culture.

She wrote eight books that included the ***Body of God: An Ecological Theology*** in which she constructed a vision of the earth as God's body.

McFague calls us to a new kind of piety—a way of life that sees everything it does for and with and to the earth as something we do for and with and to God.

In her last book, ***Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint***, she sharpens her critique of Western culture and the ways Christianity has failed to fulfill our cultural responsibilities. She calls Christians to account for so easily synching up with consumerism, so much so that consuming has become our religion. We find “meaning and fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services.”¹

Dr. McFague was my advisor at Vanderbilt. She taught me a lot about what it means to be a theologian who constructs from the flesh and blood realities of the world. So her death fills me with sorrow as well as gratitude.

Remembering her yesterday took me back to ***The Body of God***, the book that was just released when I was her student and advisee at Vanderbilt. She begins the book with this story:

Walking home from school one day when I was in the second grade, I had a terrifying, yet oddly irresistible, thought that someday I would not be here any longer. I simply would not “be” at all. Christmas would come and I would not be here to open my presents, in the summer I would not go to our cabin..., and, most unbelievable of all, on my birthday, my day, I would not be here to celebrate it. As with a sore that hurts when touched but we cannot leave it alone, I brooded over this deeply frightening but strangely seductive thought for weeks. It was not primarily a thought of death, for it contained no illness, blood, or violence but as I now see, a thought of extinction, a thought of no longer being in existence, a thought of annihilation. It is an unthinkable thought, a thought around which one cannot wrap one's mind, for unlike death, which assumes a life lived and lets the focus be on the richness and uniqueness of that life, annihilation or extinction looks beyond to the nothingness, the emptiness, that follows.²

Her words about her second-grade-self contemplating her being gone from the planet have a raw poignancy in the wake of her death.

My first day of classes at Vanderbilt I saw a tiny woman walking swiftly and deliberately toward the Divinity School hunched over with lots of books and a large bag. The person I was with said, “that’s Sallie McFague.”

I couldn’t believe that tiny little person was the body that carried the voice of the powerful feminist theologian I had read and admired. God packed a lot of punch into that little body—she was a force to be reckoned with! It is as if her very DNA tells the story she called us to make our own—we human beings need to take up less space, less is more.

That little second grader walking home from school brooding about nothingness became that woman walking so deliberately to do the work of calling Christians to task for our excesses.

The emptiness she feared as a child was something she actually befriended as a theologian. Her last book was all about the practice of restraint that she invites us to practice in our lives in a consumer culture. She cultivated this invitation from Christ’s self-emptying.

Christians can change the world if we live our own convictions—that “to find one’s life one must lose it.”

Together this Fall Eucharist has taken up more space in our worship in hopes that we could gain some insight into how Eucharist changes the way we actually live our lives.

This Table teaches us many powerful lessons in these pressing times. One in particular calls to us in our context: excess and abundance are not the same thing. Abundance is enough for everyone and nothing is wasted. Excess is too much for some and too much is lost.

Excess takes hold when consumption dictates our behavior instead of community. Excess is a symptom of the disease of individualism.

Abundance is a sign of our capacity to be well together, it defines us when we live the truth of our interdependence.

The culture change that we are responsible for in this tumultuous and contested world begins right here at this Table. When we let the things we taste here define our vision of a better world—then our lives change, our aspirations change.

Here we taste and see who it is that God created us to be together. This is a foretaste of God's new heaven and new earth.

But it's our job as Jesus followers to live as if that vision's truth changes not just the world's future, but also our way of being in the world right here, right now.

So the question we really need to ask ourselves today is what is standing in our way of letting this Table change us? What keeps us from living with less, from laying down the burden of consumption, from waking up from our malaise about the change the world needs us to not just taste and see, but to taste and be?

Thanks be to God.

¹ Sallie McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Constraint*. (Fortress, 2013),

² Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. (Fortress, 1993), 1.