

Isaiah 65:24- 25

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

Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

Covenant: Plants and Animals and People (July 2, 2023)

Intro

This morning we are beginning a summer series on faith filled ecology, which means some of my reflections will drift towards organic matter. At the end you can decide whether my sentiments go to the green bin or black bin. Maybe we begin with a cursory look at the Genesis passage.

In the post flood season God begins by blessing Noah and his family (9.1) and establishing a covenant with them (9.8). Good going Noah and family-- you got Divine endorsement!! And then God does something really interesting. God extends this covenant to all the living creatures which have tumbled out of the ark (9.10). A bow is set in the sky as a sign of God’s covenant with *the earth* (9.13)—the earth, did we hear that? The soil and its organisms and the creatures from the ark are precious to God, not just humankind. Perhaps this restatement, even a pointed

reminder, that the human stewardship set forth in the early chapters of Genesis (1:29ff, 2:2:19ff) entails nurture and not exploitation.

In a God centered world, our intentions and actions are necessarily shaped by what God desires. In a human centered world, everyone is their own god and seeks what the best for themselves or best for the tribe. What the biblical authors describe as “everyone doing what is right in their own eyes” (see Joshua 17:6, Isaiah 5:21ff, Proverbs 3:7). Isaiah 24 describes a horrific account of what happens when humans become self serving; it results in drought, pollution, and unemployment. Reading Isaiah 24, and paying attention to the comprehensive reports on the state of earth’s ecosystems, is bleak business. Where do we begin to chart a new way forward?

Section One: Beauty and Gratitude

I am convinced that love and beauty are those Divine impulses which will ultimately save humanity. Creation is resilient and over centuries I think the earth would repair itself. If the earth becomes too toxic, however, we would not survive that slow detoxification.¹ Humanity might miss out on the new creation of which Isaiah and John of Revelation fame write. We can talk about responsibility and stewardship, and this is well and fine, but they are emotions that derive out of a sense of obligation and fear. And granted, a sense of obligation is one way to leverage Christian responsibility among some. I do think, however, that there are more compelling emotions which will strengthen us for striving towards ecological stewardship. Fyodor Dostoevsky is quoted as saying, “The world will be saved by beauty.”² I would agree. When we begin to see the beauty of that which is around us, we become grateful. These emotions inspire changes in behavior. A story which reflects this impulse comes from Kent Nerburn’s *The Wolf at Twilight: An Indian Elders Journey through a Land of Ghosts and Shadows*.

Kent is non-aboriginal and Dan is a Lakota elder, and they are on a journey together to find Dan’s dead sister. They were in the hinterland and stopped at a gas station to get some nutrition—gas and food. Unfortunately they got some spoiled hotdogs. Spoiled hotdogs are a nasty piece of business. Kent tossed his away after sampling it. That is where we pick up the story. Dan the elder approaches Kent and says, “You should have given thanks. I’ve been watching you. You never give thanks. You should always give thanks. White people don’t give thanks enough. Too busy or something.”

“Dan, that hot dog was spoiled.” “It was a gift from the Creator,” [responded Dan]. Dan’s tone and presumption were not sitting well with me. I was tired, sweaty, wet, scratched up. All I’d had to eat [that] day was kool-aid, a

¹ [Could humans really destroy all life on Earth? - BBC Future](#)

² Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2011 edition), p. 472.

couple of cookies, and a bite of spoiled meat, and I hadn't had any coffee worthy of the name, and I told him so. Dan looked down on me with disdain.

"Ninety years of living have taken more stuffing out of me than you ever had to begin with. That doesn't stop me from giving thanks. Now get up and offer some tobacco"....

Slowly I turned in each direction and offered thanks for something of beauty I found in the moment—the buzz of the insects, the wind whispering in the trees, the mummer of the creek, the little animal I heard in the grasses. By the time I had made a full circle I had searched my heart and senses for everything of beauty around me." (From pages 106-108) Maybe, the world will be saved by beauty.

As some know, I like a good stroll now and then. And I have come to enjoy Cranberry Flats. When I walk there, I see plants and birds and other creatures I do not regularly see on my typical walking path. It is a conservation area which means dogs should be on leash, people shouldn't litter, walkers shouldn't pick plants and that we might walk lightly in creation among the creatures with whom God Almighty has covenanted. Sometimes I even take a trash bag to collect some trash; and truth be told not all trash can be recovered without gloves. Out there I see crocuses, which only grow in undisturbed native prairie. Out there I can find prairie lilies which you don't often find anymore in the wild. Out there I hear meadowlarks which have gone absent from many of our rural settings. Out there I have seen eagles, broad-winged hawks, northern harriers, osprey, kingbirds, flocks of cranes and so many song birds which I can not identify.

I see the lilies and grass and I think of Matthew's Gospel. "Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin" (Matt 6:26-28). The encouragement Jesus offers is to not worry, but I do worry because there are fewer and fewer lilies and crocuses out there upon which to meditate. Their beauty, and dwindling numbers, is noteworthy.

Section Two: The Stark Reality & Hope

God promised to never destroy the earth in Genesis 9, but humanity made no such commitment. The bonds that hold nature together may be at risk of unraveling from deforestation, overfishing, development, and other human activities, a landmark United Nations report warns. Thanks to human pressures, one million species may be pushed to extinction in the next few years, with serious consequences for human beings as well as the rest of life on Earth. "The evidence is crystal clear: Nature is in trouble. Therefore we are in trouble," said

Sandra Díaz, one of the co-chairs of the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.³

In the report, Professor Settele (also a co-chair of the study group) adds “This loss is a direct result of human activity and constitutes a direct threat to human well-being in all regions of the world.”⁴ The situation is critical, but not hopeless, the authors of the report say. It is still possible to slow the destruction of the natural world, but it will require “transformative change” at the highest levels.⁵ There are points of progress in this intention to live sustainably among the plants and animals also covenanted to God.

Take, for examples, initiatives promoted by the Nature Conservancy of Saskatchewan in the last years to restore areas historically considered to be Grasslands in the southern part of our province. In interviews Nature Conservancy personnel have noted that the Grasslands “provide essential ecosystem services, such as carbon storage, flood mitigation and drought resilience.” Further to that they are complex ecosystems that support hundreds of species and that includes over 60 species which are at risk of endangerment: birds like Sprague’s pipit, the bobolink and Baird’s sparrow, the American badger and the northern leopard frog. 74% of natural Grasslands have been lost to this point. The NCC nation wide helped the Saskatchewan chapter purchase ranch land near Buffalo Pound Lake to attend to invasive species, allow natural restoration to happen, and otherwise manage the land through sustainable grazing practices (cattle or bison).⁶

Then just two weeks ago I heard Leisha Grebinski of the CBC morning edition (Saskatoon) speak with Cameron Wood, acting Regional Director for Nature Conservancy Canada in Sk. about the Parker Conservation Project in the Cypress Hills Uplands. This project would involve 500,000 hectares of restoration. In that interview it was noted that the grasslands are one of the most effective carbon capture systems we have on earth. It was described as an upside down Amazon forest when a person considers the depth of the grassland roots.⁷

This kind of restoration is happening across the globe. Scientists say Fiji’s coral reefs are recovering faster than expected from a devastating 2016 cyclone, offering evidence that well-managed reefs are more resilient. With winds up to 174 mph, Tropical Cyclone Winston killed 44 people, caused \$1.4 billion in damage,

³ Stephen Leahay, *One Million Species at Risk of Extinction, UN Report Warns*, National Geographic (May 6, 2019). [One million species at risk of extinction, UN report warns \(nationalgeographic.com\)](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2019/05/06/one-million-species-at-risk-of-extinction-un-report-warns/)

⁴ [UN Report: Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented'; Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating' - United Nations Sustainable Development](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/un-report-natures-dangerous-decline-unprecedented-species-extinction-rates-accelerating/)

⁵ [One Million Species at Risk of Extinction, Threatening Human Communities Around the World, U.N. Report Warns | Science | Smithsonian Magazine](https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/05/one-million-species-at-risk-of-extinction-threatening-human-communities-around-the-world-un-report-warns/)

⁶ [Nature Conservancy finalizes Sask. grasslands purchase for restoration | The Star Phoenix](https://www.thestar.com/news/local/saskatoon/nature-conservancy-finalizes-sask-grasslands-purchase-for-restoration)

⁷ [Nature Conservancy of Canada has a goal to protect 500 thousand hectares of that grassland by 2030 | Saskatoon Morning with Leisha Grebinski | Live Radio | CBC Listen](https://www.cbc.ca/saskatoon/news/nature-conservancy-of-canada-has-a-goal-to-protect-500-thousand-hectares-of-that-grassland-by-2030)

and turned critical reef systems to rubble. But on a dive last December, scientists found a colorful reef once again teeming with life. Young coral colonies are filling protected areas, and fish are returning throughout the region. It was the third dive conducted by representatives of Fiji's Program since the storm.⁸

Hawaii's state bird, the nene (pronounced nay-nay), once on the brink of extinction, has made a comeback. The state's only native goose numbered just 30 in the 1960s. With protection under the Endangered Species Act, along with captive breeding and rigorous habitat restoration, the number of nene rose to more than 3,000 in 2019. The official announcement downlisting the nene from endangered to threatened in December 2019 marks a tremendous achievement of Hawaii's conservation community. It took 60 years of collaborative work and recovery efforts to bring back the endangered species. State officials and conservationists continue to work to keep the species protected in "the endangered species capital of the world."⁹

Section Three: The Discipleship of the Text

What then might be some points of discipleship?

1. Learn to give thanks and see beauty. If it helps turn in the four directions, up and down to focus one's five senses, do so. It helps to do this in nature. At the meal table we can give thanks for the beauty before us.
2. Restore what is under your management. Maybe that is a relationship with a person, maybe it is the neighbourhood in which you live, or maybe it is the trail on which you which you walk.
3. Consider planting or growing something which brings beauty and connection to other growing things. Robin Wall Kimmerer reflects upon this in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*.¹⁰ Gardening of any kind is just generally good for us. The positive effects of gardening have been the subject of several psychological studies. A 2016 paper from the Oxford Journal of Public Health found that people who used community gardens "had a significantly better self-esteem, [less] mood disturbance and [greater] general health, experiencing less depression and fatigue and more vigour. A 2013 paper from the Mental Health Review Journal also analyzed gardening as a mental health intervention in several studies for people with depression and anxiety. It found consistent benefits, such as "reduced stress and improved mood ... improved sleep and physical health and spiritual

⁸ [From human trafficking intel to coral reef recovery, a week in progress - CSMonitor.com](#)

⁹ [Progress: Hawaii's state bird is no longer endangered, and more - CSMonitor.com](#)

¹⁰ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), pp 126-127.

benefits such as feeling more connected to nature and fascinated by plants."¹¹

4. Ecological stewardship is holy work, and Christians are a fraction of those God has called to tend the sacred covenants. We do well to work together with, and learn from, some of the others God has ordained for the task.

Conclusion

I began with reflections on Genesis 9 and will conclude with thoughts from Isaiah 65. This is not the first time in Isaiah that we have heard words like this. Similar ideas appear in Chapters 9, 11, and 25; with near identical phrasing as to what we find in chapter 9. “The vision of Isaiah in 11:1-9 links the prophet’s messianic hope with the promise of an earth free from violence. Nowhere else is such a hope and a promise expressed with such extravagant originality. So it is not surprising that at the end of the book, this vision is reviewed for a new time and place. As the book draws to its conclusion a fresh “picture of creation restored to its God-intended wholeness” finds expression (Hanson: 247). Here it is no longer a new revelation but actually a declaration of what has already been said and needs to be said again. And it needs to be said again in order to fire the imaginations of all who read it”.¹² As we close, the Isaiah 65 passage helps us clarify several important points.

1. The restoration which Isaiah envisions also includes reconciliation among peoples. Sadly, some nations and tribes are in danger of going on the endangered species list on account of seemingly intractable conflicts. The war in Ukraine, for example, is bad for the people and plants and earth.
2. Many of the conflicts are rooted in ecological issues: access to water, to food sources, to immigration spurred on by droughts and floods and fires. A healthy earth will contribute to healthier relationships among peoples.
3. Finally, God says “Before they call, I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.” “The Lord’s presence is accessible even when [God’s] people do not want it (Is 65:1), even before they request it (65.24)”.¹³ Isn’t that Amazing? God has begun to aid us even before we get around to asking for help. This promise is beautiful. It causes me to be grateful. And it is the good news for our lives, for the generations, and for the earth itself. Amen.

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¹¹ [How gardening gave me structure, purpose and a path out of depression during the pandemic | CBC News](#)

¹² Ivan D. Friesen, *Isaiah* in The Believers Church Bible Commentary Series (Waterloo, Ont: Herald Press, 2009), p. 414.

¹³ Friesen, *ibid.*