



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

October 17, 2021 “A Dream from the Hilltowns” Sermon by Rev. David Jones

I want to thank Bruce for his sermon last week while I was away that focused on Job. The book of Job has always been very important to me, but I have to confess it continues to confound me. So I am indebted to his insights this morning.

I am also grateful for his filling in for me, so that I could get home to Canada for Thanksgiving for the first time in many years. It's about a six hour drive each way, but I almost wished it was longer this time, the leaves as bright and fiery as they were. And when I was there, I dreamt of the time I went for a drive with Rev. Mick Comstock, almost two years ago now--almost exactly, because I remember it was right after Fall Festival--and we went down some very small back roads, a shortcut maybe from Hawley to Heath. And there were stretches where the road was carpeted with bright orange leaves and every tree that you could see alongside the road and as far as you could see ahead of you and behind you, was the same orange--somehow there were as many leaves still up on their branches as there were fallen on the road, it seemed very strange. I remember that moment often, it was right after a storm had gone through and everything was damp. I find that God's voice gets a little easier to make out in those quiet moments that immediately precede and follow a big storm.

Our passage from Job this morning finds God saying something to Job out of a whirlwind, something that God's human creatures desperately need to hear: (and that is) that God deals with us humans in the same way that God deals with lions and ravens and rivers and valleys; that God doesn't make us to be ill or healthy anymore than God has made the deer only for wolves; that God simply makes mortal Life in all its richness and variety and contradiction. Our poet, who authored this story of Job, knew their Proverbs that said if you do this and that you will become rich, you will prosper, and if you do this or that you will become poor, you will be miserable. But a poet also hikes a hill to look into the stars; a poet sits down in a verdant glen and bathes in a quiet brook; and a poet sees ravens flying overhead and hears its young crying out from the trees. Our poet surely experienced joy and sadness, happiness and anxiety, struggle and ease, and lived for times in safety and in fear. He discovered that to hitch your faith to the post of prosperity or good health makes no more sense than to stake God's tent on the uncertain outcome of a hunt or harvest or fall festival. Our faith, like the poet's, goes deeper than this. Our faith brings us into communion with all of Creation, and with all of human experience. And so it has to come into communion with the seasons of the fields and of human life, and it has to see that God is responsible both for more and less than we often like to imagine.

In this passage in Job, God has come to remind us that it is not humankind at the center of the universe, it is not humankind that is the protagonist of the story of existence. Only God, not humankind, can ever be said to possess or to own or to hold the Earth in their hands. God comes to remind us that we are guests like the ravens and lions in God's fields, like the rabbits and insects in God's gardens. We have the right, like Job does, to cry out when we are hungry or afraid. But the young lions have that same right, and the young ravens too.

The message from the whirlwind, then, from God's lips to Job's ears--from Creator to creature--is to teach us what we are not, so that we might discover what we can yet be. God has not forsaken us, God is waiting for us. And God is so faithful to us, that even as we allow powerful corporations and nations and the greediest people

to spoil this earth, and even as we all play a part in destroying so much of its light and life--still God draws closer, nearer and nearer. God tries everything, God thunders and whispers, God sends signs and moves us from within. Despite the strain on us, despite how atomized and isolated and alone we have been made to feel, God keeps drawing us into houses of prayer and communities of conscience and organizations determined to change things. God keeps showing us again and again that justice and love can cure us of our afflictions of reckless overproduction and irrational labor and conspicuous consumption, that even this incredible level of wealth and material comfort could one day be sustainable if we learn to share it and move now to replace harmful practices with healing ones, to rest more and work less.

Still, by God, there is a way home, a path still open to us--and of course there is! God created us, this earth was made with us in mind too. But we have to accept this faith from God and offer it back to God. If we do, if we can have genuine faith (or genuine hope or gratitude or whatever we want to call it), then we will necessarily believe in each other. And if we do that--if we can believe in each other, strange and distant as we have become from one another--then we can believe in the stars too, and in the creatures. And we can become like those who dream. If we believe in God and remember God, we will believe and remember that the land is God's, the animals are God's, are neighbor's are God's, our coworker's are God's, and we are justified in coming into this home and making ourselves at home, when we take care of it and share it. We are all invited and it is big enough and great enough and diverse and varied enough to fit us all.

You see, God is not capricious and uncaring and remote, God is so deeply involved, so profoundly sensitive and responsive to this Creation that God has to be mindful of all of it, every person and every creature, every landscape and horizon, the smallest particle and the most distant moon. God creates in search of balance and harmony, and invites profoundly sensitive creatures like us to join in God's divine, creative work. (We talk about privilege sometimes, often in the sense of a privilege that one of us has and another doesn't. But here is a privilege we humans all share in, we have this immense privilege of being honored guests in the home that God has made to house all the energy and life on Earth).

And this brings us to today, to this morning and to the public prayer witness we will make with our siblings. With climate change we are discovering in the present age what the ancient poets of our scripture discovered in theirs: our privileged place in this home is subject to review. No matter what we have talked ourselves into or no matter how pure and unmixed our motives are, if we fail to be good stewards of God's Creation and are poor guests in God's home, we may not be welcome forever. Or at least that's what we should pray for. Because we are not God, and if our recklessness destroys what has so pleased God, but somehow we survive in the process, I am not sure what hope we will have left. We won't be able to make the Prodigal Son's journey if we have burned down the Prodigal Father's home. The Son was extravagant with money, but the Father was extravagant with love, loving each of his children unconditionally. That is what homes are made of, unconditional love, that is what the earth is made of, soil and water that gives life to all things, to creatures big and small and to humans good and bad. Where will this extravagant love reside to ever welcome us home again, to restore us, to set shouts of joy on our tongues and hails of laughter in our mouths that shake off our tears and end our weeping--if it is not just money that we squander but the home that love created, where will we go?

So we have a choice to make now, before it is too late. We can choose as a nation to be insecure and arrogant, and destroy the garden and the field, and in our path of destruction tell ourselves that we are God after all, though we will be lost. Or we can choose to become confident and patient and answer God's invitation to be one of God's creatures, a good and loyal friend to God's creative work; we can become big in cultivating the field and nurturing the garden to feed not only every child but every person regardless of age, nationality, race, sexuality, or ability. We can trust in God that if we care for one another--love one another--as God hopes, we will also have learned and begun to care for our fellow creatures and to preserve the delicate ecosystem that sustains us all.

Of course I know the choice we have made as a church, and are making as a community. In the hilltowns we really are a people like those who dream, we have heard the ministry of the trees and the river. I was so

delighted on my drive from Shelburne Falls to Morrisburg, Ontario, through the Berkshires, Vermont and New York, climbing rolling hills into the high Adirondacks and shimmering lakes, a cascade of farms and wild nature, and to catch myself--or to pinch myself--as I remembered that the best of this drive is all present, all contained, here in Buckland and Ashfield, that this unique parcel of land--this particular room--is the place where we sleep and awake to love and work. But I'm afraid the whole country and the whole world still has to make our same choice. So we have to share our dream from the hilltowns. And that is what we will pray for on the common today.

Though we have her spark in us, we are not God, but we are a beloved guest in her home. And she is still inviting us to help care for it.

Alleluia and amen.