

Global Good: For the Sake of the Earth

*A sermon preached on Isaiah 11:1-10 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on December 8, 2019*

I.

Waste Allocation Load-Lifter: Earth-Class is his name. Or WALL-E for short. The last remaining robotic trash compactor left behind on an uninhabitable earth in the 29th century, WALL-E scours the ravaged landscape for trash. He doesn't have to look far — garbage covers the dusty, desolate earth. Centuries earlier, humanity's over-consumption and undervaluing of the land led a massive corporation to evacuate the human race from earth onto enormous starliners — spaceship-like containers where overstuffed people zoom around the constructed, commercialized universe on motorized chairs. Our planet, you see, was no longer inhabitable. Nothing could grow. New life was but a figment, a faded memory, a stump from a once fruitful tree, deadened with neglect.¹

Theo is his name. A British former activist-turned-cynical bureaucrat, Theo is but one of countless citizens kidnapped in the dystopian future of the year 2027. Crisis had ravaged the globe over the past 18 years, as women everywhere were found to be infertile. A worldwide humanity on the brink of extinction was driven into a frenzy. Governments collapsed. Refugees and asylum seekers to the barely-functioning societies were roundly persecuted. Our humanity, you see, was no longer sustainable. No one could be born.

¹ Thanks to Wikipedia for the refresher about WALL-E plot details! <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WALL-E>

New life was but a figment, a faded memory, a stump from a once fruitful tree, deadened with despair.²

II.

Perhaps it's due to our hyper-rational minds or our struggle to collectively conceptualize what might be. Or maybe it's because we can all too easily be consumed merely by what's "just beyond the end of our nose," as Mary Poppins once said. But the human capacity to envision, to imagine, to wonder about what might be sometimes needs the helpful nudge by the artists and the filmmakers, the poets and the prophets among us to image the future possibilities that we often can't see.

For as a soul friend reminds me, "once you see, you can't unsee." Once we're given the imagination, the vision, the perspective — whether conjured by self or prompted by another — then comes the question: *now what do I do with this?* Once we see the injustice, once we see the implicit bias, once we see our own failures, once we see what could be, once we see a reflection of what is, we can't unsee it. We may act upon that vision, we may let it incapacitate or immobilize us, but we can't unsee.

Advent demands that we do the work of seeing, and on this second Sunday of Advent, our guides aren't just these aforementioned characters from the movies WALL-E and Children of Men, but also those aforementioned prophets — Isaiah and John the Baptist.

If you remember from last week, Isaiah's pattern of proclamation to the people of Israel is one that begins with a clear and direct admonition of where they are falling short, how they are not living as the Lord intends.

² Thanks to Wikipedia for the refresher about *Children of Men* plot details! https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children_of_Men

Because of their communal action or inaction, the Lord will demand a change, a turn, a new way of being lest destruction fall upon them.

Destruction is where chapter 10 concludes – “look,” Isaiah foretells, “the Lord of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low. The Lord will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.” *This is the future towards which you are living, Isaiah seems to say. And that which has once given life, that which has shown power, that which has seemed permanent and fixed will not be spared.*

From another time comes another prophet, also with a direct address demanding a change on the part of the people receiving his words. “Prepare the way of the Lord,” John cries in the wilderness. “Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Don’t cling to the social location and status your ancestors have granted to you. That doesn’t matter to God. For even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Not exactly a ‘holly jolly Christmas’!

III.

The imagery of Isaiah and John the Baptist might be stark, and the imagined future of WALL-E and Children of Men might be grave, but I imagine, though, that this sense of desolation and despair they share is familiar to us, even – and perhaps especially – during this time of year. Who among us hasn’t seen a landscape of our life once alive and flourishing but now reduced to an unending wasteland? Who among us hasn’t experienced places in our lives where we’ve felt cut off, deadened, torn down? Who

among us hasn't felt like the once-fruitful parts of our lives are but a shadow of what they once were, dead and discarded, a forest now reduced to stumps? These are the places where hope for new life and peace amidst the violence, the destruction, the end feels completely out of reach, and thus, out of sight.

How true this is in our individual lives, but how potent it is in our communal lives too. Who among us could watch the gruesome repetition of violence each day – mass shootings, sexual abuse, war around the world – and not feel despair? Who among us could hear the constant tearing of our shared moral fabric, our common civility, our celebrated democracy and not be terrified by what disintegration tomorrow might bring – and the next day and the day after that? Who among us could feel the world warm around us, see the fires spread and storms rage beyond us, and watch the creatures die among us and not be seized with a desperate fear for the sake of our earth? Once you see, you can't unsee!

That process of what happens when we awaken and see must be on our minds – and the mind of [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) – who just this week named “existential” as the word of the year for 2019. It was a word notable in our internet searches this year, perhaps as we wrestled with climate change, with a fracturing civility, with democracy, with horrific violence and destruction all around us. Their finger firmly on the collective pulse, [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) found *existential* to speak to the cultural zeitgeist; in their words, *existential* “captures a sense of grappling with the survival—literally and figuratively—of our planet, our loved ones, our ways of life. But, *existential* also inspires us to ask big questions about who we are and what our purpose is in the face of

our various challenges—and it reminds us that we can make choices about our lives in how we answer those questions.”³

For when it seems that all life is rupturing, that all humanity is unraveling, that all creation is groaning, nothing short of the movement of God in the world can bring about the hope, peace, joy, and love that will set things right, that will en flesh new life from dead places, that will open eyes and ears to receive again good news.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,” Isaiah rejoices, “and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” From cut-down forests comes new creation! From displaced relationships and a hunger for power from the line of David gone wrong emerges a new leader filled with the spirit of the Lord. From a landscape of injustice and exploitation, despair and devastation grows this One who bears the mark of “wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and delight and fear of the lord.” He will lead with righteousness with special care for the poor, he will judge fairly with attentiveness to the meek, he will clothe himself with the responsibility for justice and faithfulness.

For when restoration comes to the human environment, reconciliation comes to the earthly environment! Predatory animal relationships of hostility and threat dissolve into a peaceable kingdom where lion and lamb rest together, where cow and bear graze together, where children lead and rest and play (in the den of rattlesnakes, no less!). Walter Brueggemann says “this poem is about the impossible possibility of the new creation! The coming king will not only do what the world takes to be possible, but will also do

³ <https://www.dictionary.com/e/word-of-the-year/>

what the world has long since declared to be impossible. [It] is about deep, radical, limitless transformation in which we – like lion, wolf, and leopard – will have no Unger for injury, no need to devour, no yearning for brutal control, no passion for domination.”⁴

And when repentance comes to the human soul, the kingdom of God comes near! For while John baptizes with water, the coming Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire – burning away our sin and carelessness and indifference, refining our faithfulness and generosity and justice, smoothing and straightening our rocky, barren paths through the wildernesses of our lives so that we might see new life sprouting in our midst.⁵

IV.

After Hurricane Katrina left the coastal landscape of the Gulf Coast ravaged and desolate, in places where you once saw flowering trees filling the earth with beauty, all that was left behind were stumps. Everywhere you turned, it seemed, you’d find stumps. Cleanup crews that began as chain-saw teams had to give way to stump-grinder teams. And along the way as recovery efforts grew and expanded, some of those stump-grinder teams began to leave them be. You might say they grew weary from the work. Or you might say they knew the persistent hope of Isaiah and the tenacious

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p103.

⁵ Beautiful imagery influenced by Debie Thomas’s essay this week: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2470>

good news of John and wondered – what might grow anew from this once-fruitful, now-deadened tree?⁶

V.

As WALL-E scours the earth for trash, one day is unexpectedly interrupted by the arrival of EVE – Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator, EVE for short – another robot sent periodically to scan the planet for plant life. WALL-E and EVE strike up a friendship, one that takes a turn when WALL-E shows EVE his most recent finding amidst the rubble – a tiny living plant. Immediately, EVE and WALL-E must journey to save the plant from all the powerful forces who'd benefit from the narrative that no life could ever be found on earth. Their trip to the starliner in captivity, separated and back again, ends as WALL-E and EVE lead the inaugural round of humans and robots to take their first steps on earth. Images of farming, fishing, and building fill the credits, as new life not found in generations now looks like hope amidst the devastation, a shoot from a stump with the power to save the planet.

And after Theo finds release from his captors, he's connected with a young African refugee named Kee, one he's tasked with escorting on her journey. Along the way, Kee reveals to Theo the reason for her journey – she is miraculously pregnant, and is trying to reach a ship on the coast called the Tomorrow, run by a hopeful bunch of scientists called the Human Project, dedicated to curing infertility. The journey to Tomorrow for Theo and Kee is harrowing, filled with escalating violence and hunger for power and despair. But that new life, once thought to be but a figment, a faded memory, a stump

⁶ With gratitude to dear friend Rev. Courtney Allen for this beautiful firsthand account of post-Katrina clean-up.

from a once fruitful tree, emerged into the world. A cry of a baby not heard in decades now sounding of peace amidst the war, a shoot from a stump with the power to save the world.

VI.

Into – not apart from – the existential crises of our world...

Among – not away from – the cut off places of our human family...

Within – not outside – the barren, burned, and broken wounds of our hearts...

Shoots emerge from stumps. Repentance gives way to fruitfulness. Peace is waged. New life is born. New creation emerges. A peaceable kingdom flourishes. God comes near. A baby in Bethlehem does what the world has long since declared to be impossible.

Do you see it?