

The earth is waiting

Isaiah 42:1-9

December 8, 2013

The earth is waiting ...

The earth is waiting for justice to be done.

Half of the people living on this earth, over three billion people, live on less than \$2.50 a day. Eighty percent, four out of every five people, live on less than \$10 a day. My wife and I do the best we can to get by, on \$350 a day. How about you? The earth is waiting for justice to be done.

In our own nation, the land of opportunity, of liberty and justice for all, the gap between rich and poor is wider than at any time in our history. Two out of every five workers, almost half of all people employed in the United States, earn less than \$20,000 a year. The wealthiest ten percent of Americans take home half of all household income, and the four hundred (400!) wealthiest Americans control more wealth than the bottom one hundred and fifty million Americans combined. Our economy is recovering and the stock market is setting all-time highs, but ninety-five percent, almost all, of any income gain since 2009 has gone to the wealthiest one percent of Americans. The earth is waiting.

The earth is waiting for justice to be done, and we are waiting for a good deal on a snowblower. The earth is waiting for justice, and we are waiting for after-Christmas sales. Really! Isn't it true? Not because we're bad people, but because our spirits have been numbed, because our hearts have grown dull.

The new pope, Francis, calls it a "globalization of indifference." "How can it be," he says, "that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?" He continues:

Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.

Our spirits have been numbed. Our hearts have grown dull. What does excite us? What does move us? What stirs our passions? A new phone? Football? The Voice? The Hawkeyes? Black Friday? A new toy?

I saw a new television ad this week. At the beginning of the spot, a young man stands in front of a school bus with the logo "Meet the Trees Foundation" lettered on its side. He speaks to the camera, "Today we are taking some kids on the best field trip they could wish for."

After the kids, younger elementary age kids, board the bus, the young man introduces himself as "Ranger Brad" and invites the kids to play "Name That Leaf." He holds up a leaf, and as one boy suggests a wrong answer, the camera pans the rest of the kids, yawning and bored and indifferent.

Then Ranger Brad announces: "But we're not going to the forest today. We're going to Toys 'R Us!" The rest of the ad shows the screaming and excited and very happy children, running through the store aisles, fondling the toys, raving about their newfound treasures. One boy holds a toy in his hands and says, "This is so cool!" and another little girl, clearly moved, says, "This is the best toy ever. I'm about to cry ..."

I'm about to cry? Over a toy? Going to a toy store is more fulfilling than getting outside and exploring the woods? This is the best field trip ever? This is the best life has to offer? What are we teaching our children? Because we are teaching our children!

What do they see us in us? What excites us? What moves us? What stirs our passions?

That's why music is so important, music like we will hear this afternoon, because music arouses our passions!

That's why preaching is so important, because good preaching arouses our passions!

That's why gathering together, Sunday after Sunday, to listen together to the word of the Lord is so important, because hearing it arouses our passions, because hearing it teaches us to long for the things God longs for. The earth is waiting!

The earth is waiting for the one the Lord makes strong, waiting for the one the Lord has chosen, waiting for the one with whom the Lord is pleased. The earth is waiting for the one who will bring justice to every nation. The earth is waiting for Lord's servant.

Who is the Lord's servant, the one the earth is waiting for? The prophet reveals the identity of the Lord's servant in the previous chapter.

*God says,
“... you, Israel my servant,
 you are the people that I have chosen,
 the descendants of Abraham, my friend.
I brought you from the ends of the earth;
 I called you from its farthest corners
 and said to you, ‘You are my servant.’*

God called the people of Israel to be his servant. God called them to see that justice is done. God called them to bring light to the nations.

But the people to whom the prophet gave this call were hardly ready to hear it. They were a defeated people, a broken people, a people in exile in Babylon, people without homes, people without a homeland. They were weak. They were lost. They were in grief. They felt abandoned by their God. But it was there, in exile, in the midst of their loss and grief and helplessness that God called them.

God called them to be his servant, and to serve a purpose much larger than the destiny of their own people and their own nation. “Through you,” God says, “I will make a covenant with all peoples.” The earth is waiting, not just Israel. The earth is hurting, not just Israel. The earth is crying out for justice, not just Israel. The Lord fashioned the earth, not just Israel. The Lord gave life and breath to all its people, not just Israel. The Lord cares about the earth, not just Israel. The earth is waiting.

And so the Lord chose the people of Israel and strengthened them and filled them with his Spirit. Not so they might fight. Not so they might stand up and shout. Not so they might make loud speeches for everybody to hear, but so they might work with unfailing hope and undying courage to bring justice, so they might open the eyes of the blind, and set free those who sit in dark prisons. Because the earth is waiting.

The earth is waiting! The earth is waiting for the Lord's servant. And who is the Lord's servant? You are!

*The Lord says,
“You are my servant, the one whom I strengthen --
 the one I have chosen,
 the one with whom I am pleased.
I have filled you with my Spirit,
 and you will bring justice to every nation.*

*You will not shout or raise your voice
or make loud speeches in the streets.
You will not break off a bent reed
or put out a flickering lamp.
You will bring lasting justice to all.
You will not lose hope or courage;
you will establish justice on the earth.
Distant lands eagerly wait for you ...”*

For me? Yes, for you! The earth is waiting for you. God calls you, not one by one, but two by two, seven by seven, family by family, church by church, community by community. God has chosen you for this time, just like God chose the people of Israel in Isaiah's time. God has empowered you, God has filled you with his Spirit, so you might bring justice to the earth.

But, you say, we are hardly the ones to see that justice is done. We are ordinary people. living in an ordinary town, right in the middle of America's neglected heartland. Who listens to us? But God is not calling you to make loud speeches!

We are old. Our churches are old. Our resources are limited. We aren't going to change anything. But God will strengthen you!

And issues of justice and fairness and equality and inclusion are so big and so complex, and we have so little stature, so little leverage, so little power to make any kind real difference. That is all true, but like Israel, God calls you in the midst of your weakness and your helplessness and your powerlessness and your resignation.

And like Israel, God calls you to serve a purpose much larger than your own destiny or the destiny of your own people. It is not only we who are waiting for God's kingdom to come. The earth is waiting. The Lord fashioned the earth, not just Christians. The Lord gave life and breath to all its people, not just Christians. The Lord cares about the earth, not just Christians.

And so the Lord calls you, Christian, for the sake of the earth, to open the eyes of the blind, and set free those who sit in dark prisons. Literally or metaphorically? Are we talking about people imprisoned by their own ignorance, enslaved by their own pride or envy or greed? Or are we talking about people literally sitting in dark prisons, put there by politics or poverty or the wrong skin color? Literal or metaphorical? Yes! Both!

And so the Lord calls you, Christian, to bring justice to the earth, not daunted by the enormity of the task, but disturbed by what you see right in front of you, working where you are, as you can, with unfailing hope and undying courage, not letting your spirits be numbed or your hearts be dulled, not turning your eyes away or covering your ears, but paying attention and being moved by what you see and hear, noticing reeds that are bent and taking care not to break them, seeing lamps that are flickering and taking care not to put them out, doing whatever you can to establish justice on earth, because the earth is waiting.

The earth is waiting. We are waiting. All the earth and all its people are waiting for the Lord's servant. And who is the Lord's servant?

He is.

He will not shout or raise his voice. He will not make loud speeches in the streets. He will not break off a bent reed or put out a flickering lamp, which is good news indeed because some of us are bent, ready to break, because the flame of life and energy and love in some of us is flickering, ready to go out.

And he will establish justice on earth. He is the light to the nations. He will set the prisoners free. He is the one through whom God has made a covenant with all peoples.

He is the one we have been waiting for, and when he comes, he calls us to follow. He is the one in whom we are chosen. He is the one through whom we are strengthened. He is the one by whom we are filled with the Spirit of God. We become, in union with him, the Lord's servant.

We become, we are, his body, his body in the world, his body broken for the sake of the world, and so it is that now, today, the earth is waiting ... for us!