

Proper 10A
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A Sign of Hope for our Journey

One of my family's favorite, summer pastimes is enjoying the butterfly garden in our backyard. It all started seven years ago when my mother-in-law, the best gardener I have ever known, planted butterfly bushes for her then six-year old granddaughter. Sadly, my mother-in-law never got to see any of our butterflies because she passed away unexpectedly that fall. The next summer Daniel decided to expand the garden in honor of his mother. One morning as he was out watering his new flowers, he noticed tiny white eggs on a dill plant. After doing some research he found that they were exactly what he had hoped - eggs laid by butterflies. Each day he watched over those eggs with the greatest of care and attention, excited to show me and Maggie they had turned into tiny caterpillars. As they grew in size so did our family's interest. When we realized that they were in danger of being eaten by birds, Daniel built them a screened-in house, supplying them with more dill and parsley so that these little, hungry caterpillars could become very fat and happy. That summer we released nine swallowtails out into God's creation. Delighting in their miraculous transformation we felt my mother-in-law's presence with us. After all, she had been the one who started us on this journey.

As many of you know we suffered another great loss three weeks ago. My 39-year-old sister in law passed away unexpectedly leaving my brother a widower with two young daughters. Our vacation turned into a time of family grief and remembrance. When Daniel and I returned home we were grateful to find solace in our beautiful garden. This past Tuesday was Carol's 40th birthday. In the midst of this difficult day Daniel and I caught a glimpse of a monarch butterfly laying her eggs on the milkweed that he had planted this spring, giving us renewed hope that even amid our sorrow there is joy; and amid our pain is beauty.

In the summertime our lectionary is filled with images of God's fruitful and life-giving creation. We follow Jesus outdoors to lakes and seas, to vineyards and fields of grain,

among seeds and birds and soil. We are surrounded by growing things: colorful flowers, ripened fruit, and large, shade-giving trees. We listen to the prophets invoke a world where the mountains and the hills break out in song and trees clap their hands in accompaniment, where briars and thorns are transformed into luscious green myrtles and cypresses. God has a way of using the created world to reveal God's never-failing goodness, especially when we need to experience it the most. God reminds us of God's abundance when we presume there's only scarcity. God plants in our hearts the image of a world where the impossible seems possible again.

The people to whom Isaiah is speaking were in desperate need of such a hope-infused outlook. The trauma of their Babylonian Exile persisted. After seeing their city destroyed; families torn apart; communities devastated, it was not surprising that the prophet's audience were not so sure anymore what they believed about their God or his promises. Old Testament professor Julia Claassens writes, "The prophet did not have an easy task to speak a word of hope when everything around him seemed hopeless. However, he succeeds in proclaiming a word that is counter to the words of the world; a word that stands over against the policies of the empire whose intent is to kill and destroy; a word that is able to imagine a world where everything is possible, where all of creation is mended and restored, where the exiles can go home and live in peace. Even more challenging than speaking a word of hope in an improbable situation is to hear and to embrace this word, so living into the promise. The people had to make the life-giving word from God their own. The ultimate intention of the prophetic word is that the exiles must take the first steps home by breaking with the empire and by joining the alternative world imagined by the prophet."

These days it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the powers that live in fierce opposition to the world imagined by Isaiah. For we are dwelling in our own exile. Experiencing the trauma of a pandemic that is destroying lives and livelihoods, creating increased isolation and fear, accompanied by our awakened awareness of our nation's centuries-old trauma of injustice and violence against our siblings of color. Into our despair Isaiah comes to us and offers an exuberant word of possibility and promise. "Hope is subversive precisely because it dares to admit that all is not as it should be," declares writer Sarah Bessey. "And so we are holding out for, working for, creating, prophesying, and living into something better — for the kingdom to come, for oaks of righteousness to tower, for

leaves to blossom, for the healing of the nations, for swords to be beaten into plowshares, for joy to come in the morning, and for redemption and justice.”

Throughout his life and teaching, Jesus makes clear that this is the message he embodies. He is the Word that awakens his followers to action. To participate with him in working for the restoration and wholeness that God desires for us and for creation. We belong to a God who tells us, through the prophetic word and the Word made flesh, that what is torn down will be raised up, and what is destroyed will live again. And because we belong to this loving, liberating and life-giving God, we can trust in this promise even when we are lost in exile. Just take a look around. Take a look at your gardens and on your pandemic walks in the woods. The caterpillars and butterflies, the meadows and the mountains and fields of trees all burst in song, shining forth with the glory and beauty of a world that is cherished by their Creator. As Franciscan Richard Rohr reflects, “The first act of divine revelation is creation itself. The first Bible is the Bible of nature.” All of creation is a sign of hope for our journey.

May we cling to this word of hope. May we cling to it, when we struggle the most on our journey. And may we revel in it, bursting into song along with the mountains and trees, so that our world can become the world imagined by Isaiah. Amen.