

## **“Natural Revelation”**

Isaiah 55:6-13; Luke 24:13-35 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts and our minds to the good news you are sharing all around us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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I wonder if any of you have been feeling like I have lately, like you're starving for some good news. Probably more of us are paying attention to the news lately, and I hope you're tuning into reliable sources for your information. But while the media does its best to throw in the occasional upbeat story, the truth is that there's a lot of bad news out there these days. Scary news, confusing news, infuriating news, and hope-sapping news. If someone were to ask us what's going on, I'm guessing we might have the same reaction as Cleopas and his friend, on that road to Emmaus. First, "they stood still, looking sad." And then we would ask, "Are you the only stranger on earth who does not know the things that have taken place in these days?"

If you're like me, asking someone how they're doing has become a very delicate matter lately. We've been creating euphemisms to avoid using the disease's exact name all the time. I've been trying not to say "pandemic" because it literally contains the word "panic" at its ends. "How are you, all things considered," we might say. "How are you holding up in these strange times?" I've noticed I most often refer to "our current circumstances", which I can do, because of course everyone knows what that means.

So if someone were to sincerely ask me what's going on, I'm pretty sure I would stand still, looking sad. And then I might ask them what rock they'd been living under. Although, in Jesus' case, it was more that he was behind the rock rather than under it! I love the story of the road to Emmaus, and not even mostly because it starts with Jesus playing dumb and then immediately calling the disciples "foolish". Despite being full of mystery and dramatic surprises, it's just so very human and full of raw emotion. Where else do you get a line like "they stood still, looking sad"?

But probably my favorite thing about this story is its sense of theological timing. Cleopas and his friend walked 6 or 7 miles with Jesus, all the while listening to him open the scriptures to them about the Messiah, and they apparently had no clue who they were talking to. They invited him into their home that evening, still unawares. When did it happen? "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." Jesus was revealed in the breaking of the bread.

Now one could make the argument that this is about the significance of the Last Supper finally sinking in, and clearly that is part of it. But I would suggest that it's deeper than that. The Last Supper was a supper – rather than a sermon or a meditation – precisely because, at its core, it is God's love tending to our most creaturely need, the need to eat. This is our deepest and surest recognition of love: to be nourished. To simultaneously be reminded of our human weakness and mortality and reassured that God is providing for us.

To see Jesus in the breaking of the bread is to breathe a sigh of relief. We no longer have to deny that we are mere mortal creatures because the One who created us is faithful. God's steadfast love endures forever. We will be fed. That assurance is what it means to see the Risen Christ. It's an assurance that bypasses our brains, speaking directly to our instincts as creatures instead. We will be fed, for Jesus is alive.

Could it be that standing still, looking sad is, in fact, a posture of openness to new revelations of God's love? We are starving for good news and longing to be fed. And if we've grown more willing to admit we are creatures, we can find inspiration from the rest of God's creation. All throughout the Hebrew scriptures, ancient writers turn to the wonders of nature to more fully express the glory of God. The psalms are full of these sorts of praises. The gospels declare the cosmic nature of the crucifixion when they note eclipses and earthquakes accompanying Jesus' death.

I asked our youth group last week what some of their favorite things in nature are. Their answers mirrored what scripture describes: the rain that nourishes the earth and our souls, the plants that complement our existence by making oxygen for us to breathe, and even the potential danger that is inherent in the wilderness, where things are not under our control.

In today's reading from Isaiah, nature offers a metaphor for what God was doing through Jesus: Jesus, the Word made flesh, is like the rain that comes down from heaven and doesn't return to heaven until it has watered the earth and brought

forth food for God's creatures. "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Yet another way in which God is revealed when our most creaturely needs are met. We recognize God's Living Word when we see God nourishing all creation.

Isaiah speaks of an "everlasting sign" in nature that is a memorial to God. If we look around, we will see that numerous signs of hope have emerged while we've been standing still, looking sad. The skies are clearer than they've been in decades, over cities like Los Angeles and Beijing and Mumbai. The canals of Venice have grown clear enough to see fish. Animals are exploring nature parks and even city streets in ways we haven't seen in years. Elephants that used to be forced to carry tourists on rides in Thailand have been liberated. Pandas in zoos that used to have constant human spectators have discovered the peace and quiet they'd been waiting for and begun to mate.

While we're standing still for a moment, we will do well to consider our role as fellow creatures within God's creation. The impact we've had on God's green earth when we're living life "normally" has been incredibly destructive. Our standing still isn't even without repercussions, as we use more disposable products for take-out meals and germ protection. But as we mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day this week, perhaps we could take this unprecedented opportunity to consider how we might re-enter "normal" life differently when the time comes. What could happen if

we decided to share God's love with all creatures, the way Jesus shared God's love with us in the breaking of the bread? How could we learn from the natural revelations of God's glory that the ancient writers lifted up for us, the mountains and hills bursting into song and the trees clapping their hands? What if instead of deforestation and desertification, we took action to promote the cultivation of the cypresses and the myrtles, to ensure the rain and snow provide water for all places and bread for all people? There is mercy for the wicked who forsake their ways, Isaiah promises, though we will likely never understand why. What if the wicked ways that need forsaking are our own? What if our destructive consumption is what is keeping us from seeing Jesus, because we've forgotten that we are fellow creatures within creation, in need of God's nourishment?

We are starving for good news, but Jesus is inviting us to be the good news. Jesus is inviting us to break bread wherever good news is needed, to meet the creaturely needs of all creation with God's love. God is revealing good news all around us: in the sunset, in the breeze, in the birds that are flocking to the tall weeds in my backyard. The mountains and hills are singing; the trees are clapping their hands. We come to worship the Living God, to be simultaneously reminded that we are mortal creatures and reassured that God is providing for us. And Jesus is revealed in the breaking of that bread. Hallelujah and Amen!