SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*Anthropocene* Isaiah 55:10-13

“Anthropocene”—this is not a word I had known or used before this past week. I stumbled over it as I was searching for something else. Instead, an article about geology caught my eye. This one, singular word was the title of an article about the work of geologists, Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, who coined the term, Anthropocene,” about 23 years ago.

They combined two words: first, the root “anthropo”, meaning “human” with the second word for root “-cene”, which is the standard suffix for “epoch” or “age” in geologic time. Together, the word describes “the present geological time interval, in which many conditions and processes on Earth are profoundly altered by human impact.”

This past week, Lake Crawford, a small, deep and picturesque body of water near the Canadian city of Toronto, was symbolically designated as ground zero of the early Anthropocene era. Crawford Lake was chosen by scientists because the annual effects of human activity on the earth’s soil, atmosphere and biology are so clearly preserved in its layers of sediment. Recorded in the layers of sediment is evidence of industrial pollution, abnormal radioactivity levels, etc.

As I read the article, and several others since then, I was amazed at how this scientific work was also reflected in the passage of Isaiah I had been reading for this morning. In case you missed it, Isaiah says about the same thing about the people he knew in his time when he writes”

*12…you shall go out in joy,  
   and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
   shall burst into song,  
   and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.   
13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
   instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,  
   for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.*

Of course, there are important differences in what the prophet was imagining so long ago about God’s work among the people, and what scientists are telling us about our work on the earth today. The two are quite distinct, even alarming, and we would be right to become very depressed if all we were reading was the scientific calculations.

The good news for us is that we have more than that to draw from. In particular, we have this passage from Isaiah, which, as short as it is, is packed with the presence of God who insists on being the in midst of human striving, and even human imprudence and folly.

Not that Isaiah has always been the voice of gentleness and mildness. Indeed, for the first 39 chapters of the book, we read an Isaiah who scolds and chastises the people. In those first chapters, he warns them what will come of their faithlessness to the Laws of God; of their lack of compassion for the poor and weak among them.

When the widows and orphans are forgotten, warns the prophet, they make themselves, as a people, vulnerable to all sorts of other behavior that will weaken them before their enemies. That is: when justice and their commitment to God is forgotten, the people lose the moral strength that binds them together and makes them strong and whole as a nation.

Sure enough, the prophet’s warnings come true. The next war finds them conquered, the whole nation carried far from home, and enslaved.

Now, as a people in captivity, Isaiah’s tone has shifted from scolding to consoling. Thankfully, Isaiah realizes that continued scolding is of no use now. Now, Isaiah learns to have pity on the people. Now, he serves them by being encouraging, and by reminding them that God has not forgotten them.

This passage is an example of Isaiah as the nation’s comforter, as their cheerleader, and as their poet of joy and hope. Indeed, Isaiah promises that when their fortunes change into that of freedom and the opportunity to return to Jerusalem, the very earth, and everything in it, will also rejoice with them. The earth itself will respond with gladness—with a flourishing and beauty that will look like a riotous outpouring of abundance and joy.

All of this will also be a sign that the people’s return will also be accompanied by goodness and fruitfulness in the plants, the soil, and everything else they will need for human thriving.

So, how are we to hear this passage all these thousands of years later—especially considering what scientists are telling us about our impact on the planet—considering the era—the Anthropocene—we seem to be living in now?

In a very real way, we are like the ancient Israelites to whom Isaiah was speaking. In a very real way we too have been captive to a way of life that has not treated the earth as a sacred gift for which we were supposed to be stewards. We have lived within a societal attitude that has not paid attention to what environmentalists have been telling us for a very long time.

We have allowed other voices to drown out the prophets among us; our own Isaiahs—and there have been quite a few of them for example: Rachel Carlson, Wendell Berry, Sir David Attenborough, Dr. David Suzuki, Dr. Jane Goodall, Greta Thunberg, and Wangari Muta Maathai, to name just a few. (BTW, I have named a few in hopes that perhaps we might read some of them together.)

In the meantime, what are we to do?

Let us begin by giving thanks that we are gathered here together to worship a God who never gives up on us. Ours is a God of infinite hope and goodness who gives us Scripture and God’s Holy Spirit that our hearts and minds might be transformed. This is our good news.

Even better news is that we are a congregation that is even now facing toward the future and is committed to responding in a way that will benefit, not just ourselves, but the whole community. That is a big part of what the Capital Campaign is about.

We have begun a journey of hope with a new vision of what the building around us can become. That is right: this Sanctuary.

Right at this moment, it is a good gathering place for us to worship. We have also made it available for a few community groups to hold meetings and musical events.

Try now to imagine how else we may gather in the community in the future?

Start by considering how, in a few weeks, we will be celebrating our 9th Annual Green Day. All of the ministries within this congregation that have celebrated and cared for the earth—the earth worms, the garden, the recycling etc.—will be showcased for the community on that day. Our commitment to caring for the earth is an example of our faithfulness to God, and Green Day is our opportunity to put that on display, and to invite others to join us in that endeavor. It is an opportunity for new ideas and new ministries to be born.

But what else can we do? Who can we invite to present to the community our own deep love and care for the earth? How can we make this a center for wholeness and healing of the earth and its people.

Here is another hint: a couple of years ago, the Bible Study group read a bestselling book called, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* by Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer. Dr. Kimmerer is a biology professor, a member of the Potawatomi Nation, and a writer of books about how these different aspects of her life intersect and inspire a deep love of the earth and a deep desire to honor the earth with faithful living on and with it.

We read it together online, via Zoom. Then we heard that Kimmerer was going to speak on the UH Mānoa campus. A few of us tried to get tickets to hear her in person, and two of us did. Perhaps next time, she could speak here, in our Sanctuary. Perhaps our church building could really become a Sanctuary, sheltering and inspiring all who are serious about earth care. Perhaps we could become a center for education, for discussion, and organizing for our community. Perhaps this is part of our future.

This, or something like it, could be our future. However, we will need to be ready for it. We will need to make sure our Sanctuary really can be a place of welcome for such endeavors. We need to allow our hope and our faith to lead us forward as we enhance and strengthen our church building.

In a world that is now in an age known as Anthropocene, our presence in the Nu’uanu community is going to be even more important than it ever has been as a place of comfort, education, and action.

Friends, thousands of years ago, our ancestors in the faith were depressed and without hope, just like many people today. Their good news, like ours, is that they had a prophet who spoke to them about a God who was going to lead them out of their feelings of loss and hopelessness. Theirs was a God whose activity in their lives was such that the very earth was going to respond with gladness.

Our good news is that this is the same God we worship; the same God who is determined that we know ourselves as a people who are blessed, and who will respond by blessing others in God’s name. Ours is a God who wants us to realize and embrace the fact that the earth really does respond to us—for good or ill.

Let our response be faithfulness and courage as God leads us forward. Let us embrace the hope that is held out to us, and let us rejoice that we can go forward toward that future and that hope together. Let this be so. Amen.