



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

Mid Week Lenten worship, April 1, 2020

Sermon Title: "Sustained With a Word"

Gospel Text: Isaiah 50: 4-9a

A few years ago I had a neighbor who got me interested in "outsider art." It is an art form where the artist is not formally trained, but felt compelled to create sometimes even in response to a vision to communicate an important message to the society around them. There can be a prophetic quality to this art. One such artist was a man named Howard Finster, part-time preacher who repaired bicycles, lawn mowers and small machines. When he was sixty, God told him to stop fixing things and start painting. Specifically, God told him, "start painting my pictures." Finster listened and for the next 30 years he painted pictures that depicted Bible stories as a way of teaching others about God's love and care and saving grace.

God's directive to this handyman/scrap collector was that he convert the acreage surrounding his repair shop to a sacred place. Finster called it Paradise Garden. There, he began the rescue of all things most people might regard as trash. His inspiration for spreading the word of God would now come through converting junk into paintings, sculpture, architecture; all of it proclaiming, metaphorically, physically and visually, the transformational power of his Lord God.

These days we are living amidst a lot of re-tooling and a lot of concern. On Transfiguration Sunday, just before Lent began, I remember extolling the virtues of taking time apart from all our busy-ness and being transformed on a retreat. Back when we were all SO busy with work, school, sports, social commitments, and more. Now we are at home. It all changed in the inkling of an eye. At the other end of Lent, as one person has said, "This is the Lentiest Lent I have ever Lented."

In theory we are now not busy. But in reality, homeschooling, working from home, figuring our technology fill many of our days. Figuring out food and toilet paper and safety are ever before us. Others are serving tirelessly in healthcare and other serving occupations amidst suffering. And all of us are attended by the busy-ness of grieving and worry and the news. And so, I hear the words of Isaiah so very differently.

We are nurtured by a tender sweet embrace of the weary being sustained with a word. And then BAM!! Suddenly we hear-
"I gave my back to those who struck me."

What happened? Where did THIS come from? When will it end?

Who knows?

While normally we would imagine an attacking army, or menacing bully or crowd, I hear the attack of this virus. Our source of suffering and lament.

Yet, if I listen, I am drawn back even here to the voice of God, spoken through words of God giving the suffering ones courage to bear what is happening. Standing in solidarity in the most isolating, terrifying, or humiliating moments.

God who has showing up, morning after morning, to waken our ears has done so to sustain and console, but also to teach us, gently, even in a mere whisper. So we can be trained to access these things when our world is a scream. Isaiah tells us not to focus upon what we see as much as what we hear. To listen FOR God. And TO God. As Jesus would say, let those with ears to hear, listen.

Lately I hear this God in new ways. The neighborhood dog bark at dawn might have been annoying before, now it is a sign of life. I hear God in the clanging of our mailbox where a faithful postal carrier has brought something important. Or the ding of my phone that a message has arrived, often lately from one of you checking in, bringing a word of encouragement. These are just a smattering of little things we might discard in the noise of our living, that might not have meant so much. Now they are transformed.

Luther would say that God comes to us in the harmonious relationship between the ready ear and the heart prepared for listening. Listening for God is about being open and aware to God's love. We can experience this in worship for sure, in meditation upon God's word, but also in nature and in art and in science, all of which are giving us command performances right now. All I have to do is look to see the budding of spring, the frequency with which people are sharing music and art to sustain each other, and the vital importance of science for us all, to know that God is most surely here for us. Helping us to listen and be met in unexpected and surprising ways beyond our weariness and restlessness.

It's no surprise that Luther says our ear and heart need to be together. Our minds spin, we feel surrounded. God comes to us calling us to rest in the love of God and hear the Spirit whispering gently into our weary soul's ear. Listen for God.

And then, to listen TO God.

God wants to give us what need for our daily living. Not just to teach us a lesson in some punitive way.

Listen to the God who came to Isaiah, who came to the people of Israel in the Hebrew Scripture. Listen to God who came in Jesus the Christ.

Usually we hear these words as being about Jesus and his suffering as we head into Holy Week. That is God's ultimate love for us.

But these words of Isaiah are truly not as much about the suffering as they are about the heart of God who comes. This God who comes to us.

Fellow faithful servants, as Christ showed us, God comes to us so we might be taught the heart of God.

We who have been taught of such a God can teach. We who have been sustained, can sustain. We who have known rest, can shepherd others away from restlessness. We who have been encouraged, might lift up.

We bear this heart of God into the challenge of contending in our world.

Where people have to set their faces like flint.

It is a time of sharing new wisdom and caring for one another.

In my favorite painting by Howard Finster of heaven and earth, these words from the art: "In the worlds beyond the light of the sun, where all of man's

work will be done, rest and victory will all be won."

And in the center, in the brightest spot among angels flying in the sky are these three words from God: I LOVE YOU.

None of us envisioned this time. Some will tell you that it is somehow the hand of a vengeful lesson-teaching God, but if you hear no others words this day-

hear the words that can sustain us, the weary. The words God brings morning after morning to us- I LOVE YOU.

May we hear it, and be sustained.

May we believe it, and embody it.

And even in all that we do not know, may we hold onto these life giving



words and continue to share their transformation and healing for this world. Amen.

For more on the artist, see <http://www.carlhammerygallery.com/artists/howard-finster>