**Renew and Sustain: Simplicity, Homesteading, and Grace**

September 19, 2021 – The Rev. Ari Wolfe

**Matthew 6:25-33**

Deut. 8:7-18 | Psalm 126 | 1 Timothy 6:6-10

 St. Columba’s, Zoom *Creationtide 3, Year B*

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 **[Draft 4]**

In our Hebrew Bible reading today from the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses is preparing the Israelites to eventually enter the land of plenty that the Lord has promised them, and bids them to remember that none of this is possible on their own, but only through God’s grace.

“Take care,” he says, “that you do not forget the Lord your God… (when you have eaten your fill, built fine houses to live in, seen your flocks and herds and money increase)...

do not exalt yourself… but remember the Lord…”

This admonition is not only for the Israelites of thousands of years ago, but as with much of scripture, lends itself to a deeper and more universal meaning that is as pertinent now as it was then: none of this is possible on our own, but only through God’s grace.

After meditating on the initial reminder to live in gratitude for what we have been given, I was touched by the description of the land that was promised:

“a good land, with flowing streams, springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, of olive trees and honey, a land... without scarcity, where the people will lack nothing…”[[1]](#footnote-0)

OK, I will admit there is a cynical part of me that responds to that with, *and look what we’ve done to it*. I don’t want to wallow in despair - which I don’t think is a helpful thing -

but I see too many of us avoiding the topic, turning away from the damage we’ve done & abrogating responsibility for fixing it.

Over the past year and a half, the Coronavirus pandemic has changed the world around us in unexpected ways;

ways that often demanded all of our attention and had many of us first in fight-or-flight mode, then hunkering down for safety, finding constructive things to occupy ourselves with,

and finally looking for ways that we could interact with each other and hold some semblance of “normal” life together in extraordinarily UN-normal times.

And it makes sense that this would take precedence over anything else. Dr. Maslow spoke about a pyramidal hierarchy of needs that we all have, with basic survival at its base

 - food, water, shelter...

Once we have that, we can move into outside concerns, to education, to improving our own lives and the lives of others…

I will hazard a guess that before the pandemic hit, most of us here today had those most basic needs met - and many of us had (and still have) far more than that.

But with our siblings around the WORLD, we were all brought back to that place of immediate need, of ensuring our survival above all else -

and while concerns about the state of the world, from wars, the plight of refugees, and the deep need for racial justice, to addressing hunger, homelessness, climate change, and so many ills did not leave us, they may have taken a back seat to making sure each of our own survival needs were being met.

Again, it makes sense… think of the warnings that flight attendants give: if the cabin loses pressure, put on your own oxygen mask first, so that you’ll be able to help others, right?

Well, here we are. Are we back to normal, to “business as usual” yet? No, not really… the seatbelt sign was turned off briefly and now it’s back on again;

but it seems, *to stick with that analogy for a minute*, that we are at least able to move cautiously about the cabin now.

And with that ability to

stick our heads back outside and start assessing what has been neglected and needs to be attended to,

a few things come immediately to my eye.

Over the past year and a half, much of our lives have been scorched - mostly figuratively, but sadly in some cases, literally - and it is time not for a “return to normal” but for ***renewal***. Renewal to me is not just a re-turn - not a turning back to what was before -

it is a *re-invigorating*, a *moving forward*

so that things are similar to where they were before, but in an improved way.

This is the challenge that is before us as we move from pre-pandemic ***Before Times*** into the time that is to come.

Will our world ever be exactly as it was? No -

not only from the pandemic, but also because of

*where we have brought our world* ***environmentally, amongst other things***.

I’m not talking about a political divide - though that has certainly widened and exacerbated existing issues;

**we as a species**, as ***humans***, have brought a catastrophic level of destruction to the earth - to the ground, the air we breathe, and the waters that have thus far sustained us.

**Natural disasters** have accelerated and intensified in the past several years… this has been documented. Depending on where you live, you may be experiencing **hundred-year storms, heat waves, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods** -

and here in California and much of the west coast,

we’re deep in a drought and it’s “**fire season**” again.

I read an article from NPR yesterday, about how firefighters have been working hard to save some of the largest and oldest trees in Sequoia National Park,[[2]](#footnote-1)wrapping fireproof blankets around many of the oldest ***monarch*** or ***giant*** Sequoias, trees that are suspected to be well over 1,000 - and some over 1500 - years old, to try and protect them from the flames.

The author of the article said, “Sequoias need fire, but ***fire is changing***.”

It's not easy to kill a giant sequoia. “They can live more than **3,000 years** and withstand repeated wildfires and droughts over the centuries…”

They add that,

“Sequoias are one of the most fire-adapted trees on the planet. (and they) weathered the low-intensity wildfires that were once the norm in the Sierra Nevada.

Fires regularly spread along the forest floor,

either ignited by lightning or [set by Native American tribes](https://www.npr.org/2020/08/24/899422710/to-manage-wildfire-california-looks-to-what-tribes-have-known-all-along)

who used burns to shape the landscape

and cultivate food and materials.

With the arrival of white settlers, fire began to disappear from these forests.

Tribes were forcibly removed from lands they once maintained, and federal firefighting agencies mounted a campaign of fire suppression, extinguishing blazes as quickly as possible.

That meant forests grew denser over the last century.

Now, the built-up vegetation has become a tinder box, fueling hotter, more extreme fires... that kill vast swaths of trees.”[[3]](#footnote-2)

With so many environmental disasters threatening us at the most basic level of survival, this seems a good time to look at how we can tread more gently on the planet and **use fewer resources**.

**So I’ve been asking the question, “What do we really need to survive?”**

Why are we driven to strive for more & more,

instead of being thankful for what we have?

In our reading from the Gospel According to Matthew,

Jesus said,

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing... can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ...***strive first for the kingdom of God***...

and all these things will be given to you...

Today’s reading from 1st Timothy asserts that,

“there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment… if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”

***Are we content?*** Can we strive to be? I believe we need to learn how to live more gently, intentionally; ***with*** the land, not ignoring its needs or warring against it.

In a word, we need to live more ***sustainably***.

There is a wonderful show that I have to admit we’ve been binge-watching (and there’s a term I’ve become far too familiar with during our Covid lockdown)...

it’s called Homestead Rescue, and it’s a “reality show” hosted by a man named Marty Rainey and two of his adult children, Misty and Matt - all of whom were raised OFF the GRID in the Alaskan wilderness.

Together, they respond to **calls for help** from people who have chosen to move away from busy cities and suburbs, away from their day-to-day jobs, **to live a simpler, more sustainable life.**

I have been fascinated by the challenges these homesteaders face and how the Raineys help them overcome them.

**But what draws me the most** is what’s at the core of it.

I had initially heard the show described as one where at the end of each episode, the featured homesteading family would

make a decision about whether to continue with the harder, simpler life they were attempting to live, or move back onto the grid - to city or county-provided gas, electricity, water, garbage collection, readily-available food, paying jobs, neighbors all around. The thing is - *spoiler alert here* - NO ONE did.

I think I have watched every season and nearly every episode, and through fires, floods, droughts, lack of plumbing or heat, houses and outbuildings falling apart, gardens and livestock being ravaged by predators…

NO ONE said they wanted to go back to where they had been before. That’s a pretty compelling endorsement for sustainable living.

Does it have to be as extreme as moving off the grid to a remote area and building your own cabin? No.

Maybe we can bring some of that “homestead” mentality to our daily lives here and now though. Maybe we can begin to live more simply and do less harm to the world around us.

Looking to achieve a bit of that, I’ve been reading some new books, following a few blogs… The author of a lovely homesteading blog called, They’re Not Our Goats, has a great post called, *The Farmgirl I’m Not*. She writes,

I have always dreamed of a full fledged “farm girl” life, but we’ve found that our reality has turned out to look a little different. My reality isn’t filled with onions hung up to dry and bushels of potatoes stored for winter. My canning cupboard is rarely full. Our garden rows couldn’t be described as straight and long, and perhaps some of them were never planted at all…

Perhaps when I envisioned myself on a farm, I imagined it would be **a much more monastic lifestyle**.

One in which I could sit and garden and sew and cook in peace, without the multitude of distractions and outside obligations… Imagine - the chance to live life as it really works. To be close to your food, to manage your home, to know what kind of work and love goes into every part of your daily needs and wants.

I will admit, the thought makes me sigh with longing.

A site called GroCycle has some great articles about how to begin homesteading - beginning with the assertion that, “You don’t need to move to a farm to get started with homesteading. Anything you can do to develop more self-sufficiency, cut costs and live closer to nature will begin moving you in the right direction.”**[[4]](#footnote-3)**

There are a lot of things we can do to live more sustainably. The *Rustic Elk* site has a list of recommendations for where to begin, wherever you are[[5]](#footnote-4). These include: starting a garden, buying produce from a CSA or Farmers Market or neighbors, learning how to bake, to can and preserve foods, maybe to make yogurt or other foods you would usually buy; making your own cleaning products, raising Backyard Chickens…

You might want to hang clothes to dry if you’re used to using a dryer, learn to knit or crochet a warm hat instead of buying one; mend clothing instead of buying it new, or buy used and upcycled clothing and items that you need around the house. I’ve been collecting ideas for projects like building a compost bin out of wooden pallets and a small greenhouse using PVC pipe and deer mesh.

Will it save the world? Maybe not. But perhaps we can change just the little space around ourselves… what we do at home, where we shop, how often or how little we drive a car… and those little things can add up. You might also find that living a simpler and more sustainable life meets a need you didn’t even know you had, that it brings you pleasure and satisfaction - both in knowing that what you choose to do affects the world around you, and in how it changes how you feel about the life you live.

And always and in all things, remember gratitude. And we will live in “a good land, with flowing streams, springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, of olive trees and honey, a land... without scarcity, where (we) will lack nothing…”

“The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.”[[6]](#footnote-5)

1. Paraphrase of NRSV, Deut. 8:7-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. A Single Fire Killed Thousands Of Sequoias. Scientists Are Racing To Save The Rest

<https://www.npr.org/2021/09/17/1037914390/giant-sequoia-national-park-wildfire-climate-change> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. A Single Fire Killed Thousands Of Sequoias. Scientists Are Racing To Save The Rest

<https://www.npr.org/2021/09/17/1037914390/giant-sequoia-national-park-wildfire-climate-change> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. <https://grocycle.com/how-to-start-a-homestead/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. https://www.therusticelk.com/living-without-the-grocery-store/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Psalm 126:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)