

# So That You May Live

Isaiah 55:3–5; Matthew 5:17-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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So we're on week two of our five-week series called "God's Shalom for our Common Home." Today's theme has to do with living in right relationships with God, with one another, and with creation.

As I mentioned last week, the Scriptures throughout this series are taken from the prophet Isaiah and the gospel of Matthew. Each week, we have a reading from the OT and a reading from the NT.

This week, we have Isaiah reminding weary exiles of their lineage to David, of an everlasting covenant made with his people, and of the steadfast, sure love of God.

And we have Jesus offering some stern-sounding words: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

What do these texts have to do with God's Shalom for our Common Home?

Well, on one level, not much. I told Marie that her writing team gave preachers a bit of a job to do this week! (She agreed.)

But I'm going to give it my best shot!

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I want to start with a phrase that I have encountered with some frequency over the course of the nearly two decades that I have been a pastor, often when someone finds out what I do for a living.

It goes something like this: Oh, I don't mind church, but, you know, I encounter God best in creation. That's where I worship. Nature is my sanctuary.

When I am on the receiving end of this phrase, I usually smile and nod in as gracious a fashion as I can muster. Inside, I'm thinking something like, "Of course nature is your sanctuary. A rather convenient justification for avoiding church!"

Now, a critic might say something like, "Well, don't knock it until you've tried it."

Well, I have tried it. During my sabbaticals and summer holidays over the years, I have had opportunities to skip church and encounter God on my own in the idyllic confines of nature.

And you know what? It was glorious.

During any number of Sundays spent out in creation, I have found myself thinking, "You know, I can think of any number of worship services that were less inspiring than this."

Having said this, these moments, beautiful and inspiring as they are, do not address the totality of human need or responsibility.

We were made for things like beauty and awe, certainly, but we were also made to be trained in the art of love.

Our souls were created for transcendent experiences and connection with creation, but they were also created for connection with our fellow human beings.

To live rightly, to live a fully human life, is to be properly oriented in at least three directions. God, our fellow humans, and toward the created world in which God has placed us.

We could probably add the self into the mix because how we view ourselves is vitally important and weaves its way throughout the other three. But for the purposes of this sermon and this series, I'm going to focus on these three.

Worshiping in the sanctuary of nature reminds us of our place in God's created world. It can teach us of our deep connection to the land, to the nonhuman world. It can show us that even though we alone are given the task of stewardship, we are not separate from creation and cannot subtract ourselves from it. Our fate is bound up with its health.

And, as I mentioned last week, our joy is deeply connected with recognizing, appreciating, and connecting with creation. Think about something as simple as how you feel if you've been inside staring at a screen all day and you go outside and put your hands in the dirt of your garden or even simply go for a walk, feel the breeze or the sun on your skin.

But worshiping in the sanctuary of nature cannot teach us how to live rightly with our fellow human beings or with God.

For this, we need the sanctuary of the church, to be brought face to face with the teachings of Jesus, to be shown what love looks like, to encounter God in sisters and brothers, to come to the table, to confess our sins, to encounter grace.

We need both if we are going to become fully human, to the glory of God.

I think it's fair to say that both Isaiah and Jesus (in Matthew 5) are addressing people who are looking for more from life than what they are presently experiencing.

Isaiah writes to people who are stuck in exile in Babylon, longing for home. Jesus speaks to people who are occupied by the Roman Empire.

In both cases, there is pain, uncertainty, expectation, perhaps some disorientation and confusion. There is a gap between their present experience and the fullness of life they long for.

As I mentioned last week, the prophets (including Jesus) often, if not always, frame exile as the result of two things idolatry and injustice. Improper worship and improper action.

We could describe it as a failure to live in right relationship in all directions—God, neighbour, and creation.

When any one of these three are out of harmony, our lives diminish in some sense. That was true in Isaiah's day, it was true in Jesus' day, and it is true in ours.

When our relationship with our fellow human beings is marked by selfishness and manipulation, when we're using people more than we're honouring them, when we see

people as means to our ends, our lives become less. We become not a source of blessing to others but a kind of curse.

And we become isolated. Ours is a time of unprecedented loneliness and social isolation. There are so many reasons for this. I do not have time to address them all.

But I cannot resist point out the deep irony of the term “social media.” The very technologies that once promised to connect us have very often had the opposite effect, driving us out of embodied relationships in actual community, and on to our devices where we retreat into like-minded echo chambers and view those who think differently with suspicion (or worse).

But that’s another sermon. I’ve written about it endlessly on my blog, so if you’re desperate to know what I think, you can go dig around there!

When our relationship with creation is marked by carelessness and an exploitative, extractive mindset, when we don’t attend to it, when we look at the world God has made purely as “resources” rather than an ecosystem in which our lives are embedded and connected, our lives become less.

We take too much and give too little. We close ourselves off to the wisdom of living simply, gratefully, content with what we have rather than always wanting more, better, faster, newer.

We easily come to think of ourselves as machines to be optimized or products to be marketed to, or digital profiles and brands to market to each other and rank ourselves against, instead the beautiful mysteries of flesh and soul that we are.

When we spend most of our time on screens, when our attention, our hopes, our fears, our outrage become dominated by what’s happening a world away, or on social media, when we spend far too much time inside, we become unhealthy in every way.

Physically. Relationally. And spiritually.

Which leads us to God. When we are not properly oriented to God, we become less than what we were made to be.

There are so many ways we do this. We reject God, ignore God, manipulate and misunderstand God, reduce God to the size of our projects and aspirations.

We make God in our image. We treat God as our therapist instead of our master, as a genie-in-a-bottle, rather than as one who can make demands upon us.

We use God to justify our preferred politics and ideologies rather than reversing the order and making our politics and ideologies pass the Jesus test.

And, sometimes we can even spend too much time contemplating divine mysteries while neglecting our fellow humans. As Scripture makes plain, to fail to love our neighbour is to fail to love the God we cannot see.

There are many more ways in which our lives can go off course in any of these three directions.

The point is that a life of fullness, a life of flourishing, is a life that is at least trying to live in right relationship in all three directions.

Our fellow human beings.

Creation.

And God.

A flourishing life, I hasten to add, is not one where we will never encounter hardship or suffering. There is so much that can be said about this, but for now I would simply point to Jesus. Jesus' life was properly oriented in all three directions and he was not exempt from pain.

But that's another sermon.

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The title of my sermon is taken from today's text from Isaiah the first verse today's reading:

Incline your ear, and come to me;  
listen, so that you may live.

It sounds obvious but is worth stating. To listen assumes that there is a voice outside of ourselves.

There is a God who made us. Who made the world. Who set things up to work best in a certain way. A way that we can either align ourselves with or ignore.

In many ways, the history of the world is the history of human beings choosing not to listen, and bearing the consequences of this failure. We are less punished for our sins than by them.

When we do not listen, we do not live—at least not as fully as we could or should. Our relationships suffer, our bodies suffer, the planet suffers.

Creation groans, as Paul says in Romans.

So, the call to us today is to listen and to live.

But as I said last week, I am convinced that my task as a preacher is to never let a Sunday go by without reminding you of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

This sounds scary, on one level. Most of us don't think that our righteousness measures up to even our own standards most of the time, to say nothing of the super-righteous!

And Jesus is indeed raising the bar. He is saying, there is a way to live well. So listen and live. Examine your hearts. It's not just about outward observance; God desires love, humility, forgiveness, purity, and sincerity.

But Jesus also knows that we will never be able to fully and completely live the lives we were made for.

The same Jesus who preached the Sermon on the Mount went to the cross for us, the ultimate and decisive expression of the steadfast love that Isaiah spoke of centuries before.

The Jesus who said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven,” also said, “Forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.”

The Christian conviction is that Jesus *becomes* our righteousness. His faithfulness becomes ours. His fidelity becomes ours. His identity becomes ours.

This gift of grace is something that we simply accept by faith.

And this radically re-contextualizes all of our attempts to pursue right relationship in each of the three directions we’ve been talking about today.

It becomes a response to the love and mercy of God, rather than an attempt to earn it. It becomes an expression of gratitude, rather than duty. It become a response of love rather than joyless obligation.

And even our failures take their place in the context of the mercy God has made known in Christ. We do not lash ourselves with guilt and self-loathing every time we fall short; we repent, we start again, and we give thanks for God’s gifts of forgiveness, absolution, restoration, and redemption.

We seek to choose to live well in all three of these directions not because we’re afraid of what will happen if we don’t (that we will be punished by a capricious God), but because we know our flourishing is bound up with the flourishing of others and with creation.

So, may we indeed pursue mutuality and right relationship in all three directions. God, neighbour, creation. They’re all connected.

And may we do for the right reasons and in the right order.

Amen.

