

The Garden City

Isaiah 55:12–13; Matthew 5:13–16

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This week, a rare thing showed up on one day of my calendar. Nothing.

No meetings, no appointments, no reminders to pick up this or that, nowhere I needed to be at such and such a time for such and such a reason.

Nothing.

(This is the kind of thing that only happens in July!)

So, on Thursday morning, I decided to do something a bit different. I pedaled my bike to work.

I thought this would be a very appropriate thing to do given our worship theme of the last five weeks. And given that it was just a gorgeous summer morning and I could use the exercise.

This week, we were encouraged to go out into the world and record a snippet of a sound you love.

I have two. Here's the first one.

[recording of bike ride]

This is a recording of me riding my bike down the jail road. You can hear vehicles whizzing past me. You can hear the chain rattling on my rickety old bike.

And you can hear the wind.

Now, it's very odd (and mostly inaccurate) to describe wind as a "sound I love." I hate the wind almost as much as I hate mushrooms (if that sentence is confusing to you, you'll have to go back and listen to last Sunday's sermon).

But this wind sounds a lot worse than it was. I was pedaling into a mild breeze. And I did actually love the sound and the feeling of the wind on my face in the relative cool of the morning.

It was a lovely ride, for the body and the mind. I got to church a bit sweaty, but I also got there with my sermon pretty much written in my head.

Forty-five minutes on the bike was more productive sermon writing time than entire afternoons in my office have been in the past (there's probably a lesson there!).

The second sound I recorded on my way home.

[recording of canal]

This is the sound of irrigation canal that I stopped at for a breather on my way home on Thursday afternoon (it was a lot hotter in the afternoon—I contemplated jumping in!).

Like many people, I simply love the sound of water moving. As I said in our first sermon in this series, there's a reason why most of us seek out water when we go on vacation. It's soothing or peaceful or conducive for reflection or... something.

Now, this is not anyone's idea of a vacation destination. It's an irrigation canal just off the jail road. It's made by human hands for human purposes. But it still sounds beautiful.

And we're going to come back to that "human hands for human purposes" part a bit later, so hold on to that.

Anyway, wind and water. Those are the sounds I was drawn to this week.

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So, to wrap up this five week series on God's shalom for our common home, we have two texts employing two metaphors. A garden and a city.

Our text from Isaiah is written to exiles in need of hope. “There is hope in your future,” Isaiah says, “and joy and peace.”

Isaiah uses vivid metaphors drawn from creation to paint a picture for the people. He talks about singing mountains and trees clapping their hands, about weeds and thorns giving way to beautiful things.

It’s an amazing vision. All creation singing a song of joy.

This is metaphorical, poetic language, certainly, but it’s also a tiny snapshot of the new creation that we believe God will one day bring about.

We could describe Isaiah’s vision as the garden.

In Matthew, Jesus says to his followers, “You are a city on a hill.”

A city?

In the context of creation care and stewardship, cities are often thought of as the problem not the solution to any of the problems our world faces.

Cities are places of concrete and pollution and garbage and consumption and traffic and noise and overpopulation. Cities are places we often *leave* when we want to reconnect with creation, with others, with our purpose, with God.

Now, Jesus was obviously not thinking about a modern metropolis when he used this phrase. Cities were far smaller back then and they would have looked very different than what the word “city” triggers in our minds today.

But still. When Jesus reaches for metaphors for the hope he has called his followers to carry into the world, he talks about a city.

Speaking of cities, this week, I read a book called *A World Without God*. It’s written by a professor of theology named Chris Palmer.

It's a bit of an odd book. It's a narrative, kind of, but it's sprinkled full of philosophy and theology and cultural analysis. It's his attempt at a creative diagnostic of our cultural moment.

The book takes place in a fictional town called "Novemberton. The name comes from a quote from Herman Melville's classic *Moby Dick*, where a dreary, hopeless kind of feeling is described as a "damp November in my soul."

Novemberton is a metaphor for our twenty-first century culture. It is a place of confusion and consumption, resignation, apathy, and the absence of hope. It is a place where people don't necessarily disbelieve in God, but they don't see how God matters.

It's a town where the people anesthetize their boredom and despair with distractions, where lives are lived on Instagram, where food and every consumer product imaginable comes in brown bags and boxes and is left on our doorsteps, where being entertained matters more than being engaged with life.

It is a culture of "infobesity" (a term I had not heard before, but which fits well)—where oceans of information and data and images and video clips and endless amounts of advertising wash over us every day, but it leaves us feeling mostly paralyzed and inert.

Novemberton is a town I recognize. Perhaps you do, too. I see it all around me. A kind of spiritual and cultural fog, like a grey, bleak November day.

Among the many things that struck me about Novemberton was how disconnected from creation it was. Novemberton is not a place where human beings are fully alive to the glory of God.

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If Novemberton is an at least *somewhat* accurate metaphor for twenty-first century modern life (and I think it is), then what is our calling as Christians?

The city on a hill that Jesus describes his followers as is the opposite of Novemberton.

It is a city where our good works are meant to shine brightly and draw people to meaning, to purpose, to creative engagement, to hope, to joy, to God.

What are these good works? Jesus has a lot to say about where blessing is found, about adultery, anger, reconciliation, loving enemies, prayer, storing up treasures in the right places, judgement, hypocrisy, and building our house on what will endure.

Living faithfully and responsibly in God's garden is not among the good works Jesus explicitly identifies.

Much as we might wish it were otherwise, Jesus has nothing explicit to say about creation care (at least not in the ways we are accustomed to talking about it).

But I would submit it is implicit in the broader story of which Jesus is the centre. Jesus said all the law and prophets could be summed up in the twin commands to love God and love our neighbours.

Love of God entails care for what God has made.

Love of neighbour requires paying attention to how our neighbours are affected by environmental degradation, which harms neighbors—especially the poor and future generations.

Lives of other-oriented love speak against extractive and exploitative dispositions toward God, neighbour, and creation.

Jesus' words about contentment, trust, and the evils of the love of money all steer us away from being uncritical participants in economies that have growth as their only metric, and toward lives of simplicity and gratitude.

And ultimately, Jesus wants his followers to be fully human, to the glory of God, which means being properly oriented toward God, neighbour, self, and the created world. New creations, as we saw in Mary's puppet show!

If twenty-first century life in the West is a kind of Novemberton, then all the more reason for the church to be the city on a hill that Jesus has called us to be.

So, as we wrap this five-week series, what do I hope we can take away from it? What am I taking away from it?

Two things.

A renewed appreciation for the complexity and the beauty of all that God has made, and of our responsibility to be better stewards. We've been doing this each week during this series.

A renewed appreciation for human beings and our role in God's story.

I think there can be a kind of misanthropic or anti-human tone to a lot of discourse around creation care, inside and outside the church.

Human beings have wrecked everything, if there could somehow just be less of us or if we could just make people feel appropriately terrified or guilty, we could fix things.

This is understandable, if ineffective. I'm not sure when you were last able to successfully change someone's behaviour by telling them how terrible they were. My list is a short one.

Human beings are, indeed, part of the problem. We do behave in greedy, exploitative, and destructive ways in God's garden.

But the answer isn't less humans, it's better humans, living more creatively and joyfully aligned with how God has set things up to work.

I sense that we sometimes think that our goal should be to get from where we are back to some kind of Eden, uncontaminated by human technology and development.

I don't think this is the case.

Way back in Genesis, God commanded the first humans to be fruitful and multiply. To cultivate, to explore, to harvest, to use our God-given faculties.

God didn't set us in a garden and say, "Here, I made this for you, keep it just like it is." Part of what it means to bear God's image is to be co-creators, to bring into being new tools, new ideas, new possibilities, new things.

As I think back to my bike ride on Thursday, I found myself grateful for the fresh air, for trees and crops and birds and all the good things in God's garden that I pedaled by.

I also found myself grateful for paved bike paths. For gears clicking on a decently constructed, if aging bicycle made of metal and rubber and plastic.

For engineers who have figured out how to re-route water into irrigation canals to water crops that will feed human beings. For complex machinery that can harvest incredible amounts of corn and wheat and hay.

For brains who have figured out how to use silicon, glass, aluminum, copper, among other things to design solar panels to harness the energy of the sun.

For the countless other ways in which human beings have exercised dominion in good and responsible and wildly creative ways.

No, we have not always got it right. Yes, we have a Christian duty to become better stewards, to consume less, to demand more, to live more wisely.

But we should not too eagerly subtract ourselves from the story of God's good creation. Human hands doing human things for human ends are also a part of creation!

I think we too easily imagine that our task is to go *back* to some kind of idyllic Eden, uncontaminated by human influence.

We forget that as Christians, we are part of a story that is moving from a garden to a city.

The last pages of Revelation speak of a new heaven, a new earth, and a New Jerusalem, the city of God.

This is metaphorical language, certainly. God knows there has been plenty of damage done by overly-literalistic readings of the book of Revelation!

But it's interesting that at the end of all things we do not get a metaphor of Eden 2.0.

We see a river, a tree of life, fruit, an abundance of fruit, of leaves for the healing of the nations. It is rich creation imagery that takes its place alongside passages like today's reading from Isaiah.

We also see a city, radiant with jewels, furnished with foundations and gates and all kinds of other imagery which I take to mean, the best of human achievement, culture, progress.

We see a redeemed community of God's image bearers, properly related to God, neighbour, and creation. The opposite of Novemberton.

Our story is heading toward a Garden City. The best of all that God has made (including us and all that we have made), judged, healed, forgiven, made new.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

