



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“From Lament to New Life”** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

November 24, 2019; Ember Day II (Reign of Christ Sunday)

Reading: Isaiah 24:3-6

That reading was pretty dark and combined with the anthem about the end drawing nigh, well, that was likely unexpected. There's a thematic flow in the church year. As we look to Advent and Christmas, we expect to mark Reign of Christ Sunday. As many churches take time today to acknowledge that our allegiance as people of faith isn't to worldly rulers but a different kind of kingdom, I'm sure you were set to hear a gospel reading about Christ's kingship is different from the world's. You heard a gloomy reading from Isaiah instead. What gives? For the second year we're marking the seasonal transition with an Ember Day, a medieval practice when they paused quarterly to give thanks for the land, and to pray in repentance. Isaiah certainly engendered that.

His imagery of the land in crisis matched what I heard on an episode of “Quirks and Quarks” about our impact as humans on the planet, especially in recent decades. Bob MacDonald spoke with Adam Smith, senior biostatistician for the Canadian Wildlife Service in Ottawa. Did you know that in the space of only fifty years, we've lost 30 % of the birds on our continent. In the 1970s, ten billion birds called North America home. Now there are only seven billion. The culprits are habitat loss from the expansion of agriculture, plus pesticides and climate change. We're not only driving the extinction of rare birds. So called “common” birds like the white throated sparrow and the dark eyed junco are under threat as well.

That's not all. Bob interviewed Ron Milo from the Weizmann Institute of Science just outside Tel Aviv. Ron discovered that since the rise of agriculture, the earth has lost half of its biomass. That means that if you weighed all life on earth - plants, animals, bacteria - there's half as much by weight now than there was ten thousand years ago, even though there were as few as a million humans then, compared to eight billion now. A good deal of the loss is in terms of plant life. Eighty per cent of life on earth is plants and the heaviest are trees. We have deforested to farm, to mine, to build our cities. As a result we're hindering the earth's ability to sustain life. We've threatened other animals too. Here's a sobering stat as we head to feasting season. Domestic birds outweigh wild ones two to one. That's turkeys and chickens compared to wrens, hawks, ostriches. Get this, when it comes to mammals, including heavyweights like whales and elephants, there are twenty times more pigs, cows, etc. than wild mammals. We've changed the composition of life on earth.

No wonder the Isaiah passage reads as it does, saying not just that the land is withering, but is so because people broke the covenant. Written more than twenty-five hundred years ago around the

time of the Babylonian exile, it feels like it could be written today. Perhaps we have broken the same covenant. Scholars suggest the everlasting covenant that Isaiah names doesn't refer to the covenant entered into at Sinai but to the one given after the flood. An interesting part of that covenant is that it's between G-d, us and other animals. If a loss of three billion birds, the threat to wild animals because of industrial agriculture, the loss of half of the planet's life and the threat to its ongoing ability to maintain it, isn't a breaking of that covenant, then I don't know what is.

Like those who first heard Isaiah's words, we can feel overwhelmed. I share this not to rob us of hope. That's what those who brought us to the brink want us to feel - paralyzed, feeling we can't do it on our own. In a podcast I listened to recently a speaker made an interesting connection. Do you remember in the 1970s when we were told not to be litterbugs? It was an American campaign but clearly effective because many of us remember it. The campaign was launched at the same time Congress was debating legislation about single use plastics. Rather than go after companies that made plastic containers and such, the onus shifted onto individuals not to pollute. The same is happening now. The world's top hundred corporations produce seventy percent of greenhouse gas emissions. They've spent a lot convincing us either not to act, or that it is an individual issue.

So as important as it is to shrink our individual carbon footprints, please don't feel guilt and shame you aren't doing more. Instead, we need to focus our attention on pressuring big emitters to do their part. As much as consumerism drives this, as consumers we can change the agenda. We can boycott, we can divest from companies, and if we're part of big pension funds, we can use our clout as major shareholders to push companies to change their practices. We don't even need the majority of people to do it. All it takes is a minimum of 3.5 % of a population, that is committed activists willing to do the work for as long as it takes, to bring about change. How? Along with committed activists, there are passive supporters who want change but are unsure of what to do. Together they bring about change, especially as they bring awareness to those who are neutral on an issue. Consider these American numbers in terms of climate action - committed activists and passive supporters together make up 46% of the US population. Add folks who are more neutral, and you have 76% of the population. In Canada the desire for climate action is even stronger. Clearly, we can do it with our collective clout. It's like being part of a congregation – you knew I'd make a stewardship reference somewhere – We pool our resources, shoulder the work and together can do really amazing things.

In the end, we can take our cue from the four-chapter portion of Isaiah we heard this morning. As you read on, the land doesn't stay cursed. Instead, renewal happens as the relationship between G-d, the people and the land is restored. The city of chaos is transformed into a garden with G-d at its centre. When we recognize the covenant is with all creation, that all creatures are essential to a thriving planet, then we will live into G-d's kingdom rather than the world's kingdom. May it be so. Amen.