

Sermon October 4, 2020
"God of the Land"
Pastor Joshua Graber
First Lutheran Church of West Allis

Grace and Peace to You in the name of God Our Loving Creator and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

I don't know if you've ever watched any Terrence Malick films but he is one of my favorite directors. His most recent film "A Hidden Life" is about a peasant farmer in the Austrian mountains who refuses to be drafted into the Nazi army. This farmer like the director who tells his story has a deep meaningful relationship with the land. In Terrence Malick films no matter what is happening with the human characters in the story, like a Pacific Island in WWII or the Jamestown settlement in Virginia, the land around the characters is always a character as well and some would say the most important character. Malick drives many of his viewers crazy while delighted others by taking long pauses from the story in order to film the land around them as if to say, these characters seem important now but the land is what will last and continue to tell the real story to new generations. Other directors would skip over this part because it doesn't seem directly connected to the plot.

Malick is someone who has studied the theology and philosophy, and knows that the way that he tells his stories, is also the way the Bible tells it's stories. Many people in reading the Bible follow the plot lines and the characters but

don't realize that the land that these characters is on is also a character not just the setting for these human stories. From the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem at the end of Revelation, the land and its produce are central to the Biblical story, and every once in awhile it deserves our attention for the powerful role the land plays in the meaning of the story. Some of you may notice that every week we pray for creation in one way or the other and I'm sure to some that may sound like some external issue of environmentalism sneaking into church, but this care for land and stewardship really goes to the heart of the Biblical story and humans relationship to the land reflecting their relationship with each other and God.

In Eden Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden when they do not follow God's one rule to not eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. They had "One Job" and they couldn't do it and in that sin they are given a new relationship with the land, one of toil and labor for the fruit and harvest.

But God also describes the House of Israel as a vineyard and returns to this metaphor again and again. This vineyard is ready to produce fruit and when they first arrive it is promised as a land of milk and honey.

But God still has expectations for the human characters that live on this land. They are to live with justice toward each other. They are to treat the land with respect and let it rest every seven years. And they are to not abuse power over others or the land. But time and time again they do. And in our verses

from Isaiah you hear God's mournful song as a broken-hearted creator who gave those he loved a wonderful gift of this vineyard only to see it trampled. Again the word of punishment is there in the form of animals and weeds and wild grapes that have taken over the land, metaphors for injustice and ill treatment.

It's a sad song! A commentator I read compared it to a love song about a brokenhearted lover. My friend John Hermanson has actually written an album of texts from Isaiah and sings Isaiah 5 in that way.

Jesus revisits this sad song of the land and creator every time he tells a story about a vineyard and the way the land is treated. Is it treated with respect? Is there justice reflected in the lives of the characters involved. The answer is usually "no".

In his story today, the landowner sends his servants to meet with the tenants who have not treated the landowner fairly. Now in that culture the landowners would not have been seen as fair in most cases, but like feudal lords of Europe in the Middle Ages or the managers of sharecroppers in the Southern US. So the fact that the landowner in this text seems to be a decent person is a tip off that the character probably reflects God. Instead of using his power and treating the tenants with suspicion and violence as expected, he is trusting and even naïve as he sends the servants and then his own son to meet with the tenants. Instead the tenants treat his messengers with violence.

In this parable, the tenants are seen as squatters on land that doesn't belong to them. Just like last week when Jesus was seen as a squatter in the Temple by the Jewish leadership, Jesus again makes them recognize that they are the squatters and they are mismanaging the responsibilities that God has given them. They would even beat and kill the true owner of the land's son if he was sent to talk to them.

And then you realize what Jesus is doing here! He is telling his story. He is the son that was sent to reveal our sin and also redeem us and the land from our sins. To bring recreation to us all even though we don't deserve it. However this should not be a license to not care or to keep doing what we are doing in terms of abusing the land and other people in our society. Jesus is always reminding us of the better way of justice and a picture of what that better way can look like on earth as it is in heaven.

As we consider the gift of the land in our lives and the fruit of God's abundance in our own lives, we are called to consider how we steward those gifts to live out our lives as God's children and Jesus disciples in this land. Knowing we are forgiven and that we are given...grace upon grace and gift after gift to share with generosity and justice so that day after day we live into God's vision of the kingdom.

May the peace that passes all understanding keep your heart and mind in
Christ Jesus our Lord.