

Now It Springs Forth

Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished,
quenched like a wick:

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

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Isaiah 43:16-21

April 6, 2025

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

As you can see from the insert in today's bulletin, we are celebrating the 22nd year of our annual All-Church Read begun in 2003. Joining a long list of distinguished, notable, fun, and beloved books are this year's selections: The Mitten Tree, by Candace Christiansen; The Magic and Mystery of Trees, by Jen Green; and, The Serviceberry, by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Special thanks to Linda Potter for, once again, making these selections which share a common theme and effectively convey it across the spectrum of readers within our congregation: young kids, Tweeners, as well as older Teens and adults. No small task, I can assure you. Especially when you consider that beyond needing to be interesting and engaging books in and of themselves, together they must also yield subject matter suitable for a sermon.

II.

I have often said that, conceptually, the sermon for the All-Church Read is the hardest one I write all year. Not only must one consolidate a great deal of information, one must also relate it to the specific scripture passage randomly generated by the lectionary. This year, though, is the exception. While it did not quite write itself, by the time I had read all three books it was abundantly clear there was a framework for a sermon which was just begging to be written. Moreover, it is sermon ideally suited for where we currently find ourselves as a congregation, nation, and world.

I would like for us to begin with Robin Wall Kimmerer and her book, The Serviceberry, Abundance and Reciprocity In The Natural World. Kimmerer is a botanist, author, and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF) located in Syracuse, New York.

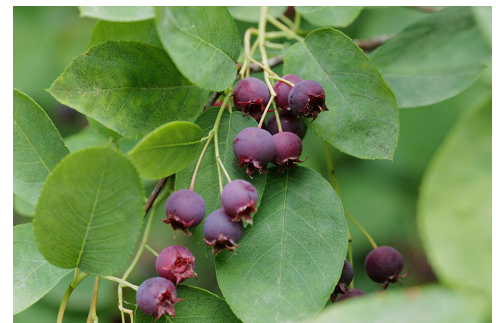
III.

The title of the book is owed to a berry-bearing tree with the Latin name *Amelanchier arborea*, which is native to eastern North America ranging from the Gulf Coast north to Thunder Bay in Ontario and Lake St. John in Quebec, and extending west to Texas and Minnesota. Depending on the region, the tree is variously known as a Saskatoon, JuneBerry, Shadbush, Shadblow, Sugarplum, Sarvis, or Serviceberry. “The tree is beloved for its fruits, for medicinal use, and for the early froth of flowers that whiten woodland edges at the first hint of spring. Serviceberry is known as a calendar plant, so faithful is it to seasonal weather patterns. Its bloom is a sign the ground has thawed indicating that mountain roads had become passable for circuit preachers and, for fisherfolk, that shad are running upstream.” (pg. 3). “The name ‘Serviceberry’ comes not from its ‘service’ but from an old version of its Rose Family name, ‘Sorbus,’ which became ‘sarvis’ and hence ‘service.’” (pg. 4)



IV.

A fast and joyful read at 112 pages, the book’s theme of abundance and reciprocity in the natural world finds its origin in Kimmerer’s experience of discovering Serviceberry trees heavily laden with fruit on her abutting neighbor’s farm. The taste of which she describes as “a Blueberry crossed with the satisfying heft of an Apple, a touch of rosewater, and a minuscule crush of almond-flavored seeds.” (*There is Saskatoon jam at Coffee Hour to try*).



As a Native American biologist, Kimmerer is quick to articulate the bounty and blessings of nature not as resources to be exploited or commodities to be owned, but as gifts to be shared. In doing so, she contends, our whole relationship to the natural world changes: “The land is the source of all goods and services, which are distributed in a kind of gift exchange; one life is given in support of another. The focus is on supporting the good of the *people*, not only on the individual. Receiving a gift from the land is coupled to attached responsibilities of sharing, respect, reciprocity, and gratitude—of which you will be reminded.” (Pg. 8)

V.

The notion of gratitude, something we talk about all the time here at the Church on the Park, is the point at which change begins to occur as gratitude leads to an awareness both of one’s abundance, and one’s indebtedness in having received such gifts. While Kimmerer never makes the connection, this is what we would understand as a theology of grace born of the Cross. More on that in just a bit, hold that thought.

The book then shifts to a discussion of economics noting the difference between an assumption of scarcity and the commodification of resources, to an assumption of bounty which can lead to a “Gift Economy.” “Recognizing ‘enoughness’ is a radical act in an economy that is always urging us to consume more.” (Pg. 12). Kimmerer continues, “If our first response to the receipt of gifts is gratitude, then our second is reciprocity: to give a gift in return.” (Pg. 13)

VI.

For Kimmerer, “Gratitude and reciprocity are the currency of a gift economy, and they have the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange, their energy concentrating as they pass from hand to hand, a truly renewable resource.” (Pg. 14). “To name the world as gift is to feel your membership in a web of reciprocity. It makes you happy and it makes you accountable. Conceiving of something as a gift changes our relationship to it in a profound way, even though the physical makeup of the ‘thing’ has not changed.” (Pg. 22). “In a gift economy, wealth is understood as having enough to share, and the practice for dealing with abundance is to give it away. Status is determined not by how much one accumulates, but by how much one gives away. The currency in a gift economy is relationship, which is

expressed as gratitude, as interdependence, and the ongoing cycles of reciprocity. The economic unit is 'we' rather than 'I,' as all flourishing is mutual." (Pg. 33)

VII.

As one reads the book and begins to consider such a gift economy, three things happen: intellectually, you decide that it makes *sense*; you determine that emotionally and spiritually it *feels* right; and, then, you start to imagine the reasons why it will *never* work. First, is the issue of scale. Giving away your extra zucchinis and leaving a book at the nearest Little Free Library are great things to do, but how does a society scale-up gift giving so as to begin to have a global or, even, a regional economic impact? Second, is the ideological divide.

A gift economy requires authentic relationships build on trust and the striving for mutual well-being. As if on cue, this past week's economic events vividly illustrate just how wide the ideological divide has become. When *Canada* is deemed a scorned trade partner, how many trusted friends remain to offer gifts?

VIII.

It becomes easy, then, to simply dismiss the kind of gift economy Kimmerer espouses as just another feel-good, liberal, radical, harebrained notion; and, I am sure, most people will be tempted do exactly that. Here is the thing, though. As I was reading the book I started to also read between the lines which, unfortunately, never seemed to intersect (though they easily *could* have). Let me read you some of Kimmerer's words and see if her ideas seem at all familiar to you:

"The challenge is to cultivate our inherent capacity for gift economies without the catalyst of catastrophe. We have to believe in our neighbors, that our shared interests supersede the impulses of selfishness." (Pg. 44)

"People (must) have the courage to say, 'Let's create something different, something aligned with our values.'" (Pg. 48)

"What we want (is): a sense of belonging and relationship and purpose and beauty, which can never be commoditized. The currency of exchange is gratitude and the infinitely renewable resource of kindness, which multiplies every time it is shared rather than depreciating with use." (Pg. 91)

“Intentional communities of mutual self-reliance and reciprocity are the wave of the future, and their currency is sharing.” (Pg. 91)
Now, to *me*, that sounds a great deal like a church; this church in particular.

IX.

The plain fact of the matter is that the church, the body of Christ, has *been* that wave moving us into the future; and doing so for thousands of years now. At our core, the church is THE gift economy made real in the world, *and* at scale. Like Kimmerer, we endeavor to honor the gifts and wisdom to be found in nature, in the creation. However, we also honor the Creator who gave us such bounty and blessings; with the Cross of Christ chief among them. Christ’s redemptive action to atone for sin, reunite us with God and, later, impart the Holy Spirit (while overcoming death, dis-ease, and disharmony along the way) is the proverbial “gift that keeps on giving.”

While Kimmerer calls it a gift economy, we know it by a different name: the Grace economy. God has given *everything* to us, including the son, through grace *alone*. Like the Serviceberries Kimmerer finds on the neighboring farm, it is a gift we cannot earn, nor is it something we necessarily deserve. What remains for us to do, then, is our works in reciprocating such a gift to others.

X.

More than just a opportunity to eat fish on Friday or an excuse to skip dessert and lose a few pounds, Lent is understood as a time of preparation for Easter. Not in hiding baskets, ordering hams, or coloring eggs, but to prepare ourselves to fully understanding the breadth and depth of the gift that is the empty tomb.

Today's scripture reading from Isaiah 43, one often cited during the Lenten season, speaks of the “new thing” God is doing. While the idea that Isaiah foretold of God’s redemptive efforts through Christ 500 years before the cross might fit neatly into the orthodox theological narrative we have constructed for ourselves, I find it unfortunate that such an understanding has only served to limit the scope and nature of the gift we have been given; and with no small amount of irony. Isaiah says, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” Nevertheless, we go ahead and make the new thing yet another old thing by relegating Easter to something that happened *way* back when. In doing so, we miss the new thing springing forth because we aren’t even looking for it.

XI.

What makes Easter so remarkable is that it is *still* taking place. Kimmerer writes that in a gift economy (that is, a grace economy) “energy flows in one inevitable direction, therefore energy must constantly be replenished to fuel the flow.” (Pg. 17). The whole point of Easter is not to merely receive the gift, it is to keep the gift giving in motion that it might spring forth in each new age and at every new moment so that the web of reciprocity will continue to grow and expand so as to include *every* corner of the creation.

Easter isn’t something that happened “back then,” it is the energized flow of redemptive love which is happening *right now*; like a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Easter happens whenever we look beyond ourselves to the needs of those around us, and work to fill those needs by sharing our abundance.

XII.

Which is exactly what occurs in The Mitten Tree, another of this year’s book selections. In a tidy little house at the end of a lane, “old Sarah” lived alone. Her children are now all grown and moved away, but she still remembers walking them to the blue spruce tree where they waited for the school bus. Looking out of a window in her house, old Sarah can still see children gather each morning at the spruce tree, though the kids never really see her as she walks past them to her mailbox. One day she notices one of the kids standing back from the others who isn’t playing in the snow as he has no mittens. The next morning, a newly knitted pair of mittens appears hanging on the spruce tree for the boy; the kids are mystified. Soon all the kids at the bus stop are sporting new mittens, as each night old Sarah would hang the next pair she had knit for the children to find the next day. Then, one morning old Sarah wakes to find a big basket full of yarn on her porch. Who is giving the gift of mittens, or the gift of yarn, no one knows for sure.

XIII.

Gift giving, generosity, and sharing are among the most important values every parent endeavors to instill in their children. These are not merely abstract principles, but the basis for all life found throughout the natural world we share as illustrated (literally and figuratively) by this year’s Tweener book selection, The Magic and Mystery of Trees. While we typically stick to

fiction when it comes to the All-Church Read, this “DK” book was selected to mesh the *science* of gift giving with the *story* of gift giving.

We’ve done a little bit of our own research, and we will soon be ordering one or two Serviceberry saplings for the kids of our congregation to plant later this spring here at the church, or in the Park, as a gift to the community, and as a gift to ourselves. Perhaps one day, many years from now, these kids will drive by the church as adults and remember having given the gift and, in so doing, recognize the gifts given to them through this church.

XIV.

I would like to end today with my take-away from Kimmerer’s book, specifically, and the experience of reading through all three of this year’s All-Church Read selections, in general. At the end of The Serviceberry, Kimmerer talks about the difference between an immature ecosystem and one which has matured over time to result in “complex interdependency, symbiosis, cooperation and the recycling of resources” (Pg. 93) Kimmerer expresses the hope that our society might achieve such a level of maturity that will “call forth the gifts of each of us; it will emphasis cooperation over competition; it will encourage circulation over hoarding; and it will be cyclical, not linear.” (Pg. 93)

For a long time now, our congregation has been endeavoring, first, to just survive; and, later, to revitalize itself and thrive. From my perspective we have been on a linear trajectory to do so, with kindness and a Christ-like compassion fueling the flight.

XV.

Now, though, it seems to me as if we’ve have attained a certain maturity, and settled into a *cycle* of church life. One which *expects* life to follow death as surely as spring follows winter. We are *living* the resurrection story for ourselves. We are not an abstraction, but a real-world truth woven and intertwined with the lives of families, and the life of this community. We are a grace economy which makes itself known by the gifts we give, and gifts which are flowing through us. Like a book given to each church kid or family every year for almost a quarter of a century.

Over the span of this experience I have learned that it isn't so much about the gift that is given but, rather, the giving of the gift. I believe the greatest gift we have to offer is the same one I think Kimmerer intends in writing The Serviceberry: the gift of hope. Here on the Park, now such a hope springs forth all around us like berries on a tree freely given. Amen.