Fed up. But it was good.
Genesis 1 – 2:4
Kendra Harbeck, guest preacher
Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren
Earth Day / Jr. High Sunday
April 22, 2018

I’m a John Denver fan. Not as much as I used to be in ninth grade, though. Then, a two-disc recording of one of his live concerts was on top of my most-played CD list. I even stood clad in denim and flannel to impersonate him at an “Images of Greatness” event.

I could have used those cd’s to sing along to a couple weeks ago as I drove alone the 12 hours of roads between Harrisonburg, VA and Elgin. Even without them, at one point in the drive, I felt moved to burst out into an a capella rendition of Country Roads. Driving through a very scenic and very uncrowded state highway in West Virginia, I couldn’t help but croon out the lyrics “Almost heaven.”

I had opted to avoid the interstate for the first stretch of driving and was rewarded with the inspiring mountain views that surrounded me. I wished I’d had a way to capture the heavenly beauty.

It was along that road, though, that I came back to earth. A road sign indicating the upcoming town of Moorefield caught my attention. I’m sure Moorefield is a lovely town, but what it up brought in my mind is a gathering of Brethren that met there last fall, Brethren unhappy with the direction of the denomination, specifically in regards to sexuality and inclusion of people who aren’t heterosexual. Personally, this is a negative enough connotation, but the name of Moorefield is further tainted by the instance of a delegation from that gathering standing before our denominational board. One of those delegates compared the Brethren/Mennonite group that advocates for LGBT interests to a white supremacist group.

Adding to all that, as I drove past the city, I noticed a large Confederate flag standing at the top of a hill.

The contrast was stark. Surrounded by such natural beauty, of a sort I rarely get to encounter, I was reminded of how ugly we humans can make things. It was a reminder of all the instances of exclusion and division that can so easily lead us to be fed up with the church. Fed up with politics. Fed up with this nation as a whole.

In March, I took part in the March for Our Lives rally here in Elgin. As I walked home, I found myself walking alongside a fellow participant who was headed to her car. She asked what it was that led me to take part, what was my personal connection. I had trouble naming something specific...at a loss for words, all I could say was that “I guess, I’m just fed up with it all.”
Fed up with the endless loss of life at the hands of guns that our country can’t seem to do without. Fed up with our political and economic situations and a shortage of leaders with the moral courage to change these situations. Fed up with a world of violence and greed. That’s the danger of putting our hopes in this earth, of working for its best...it’s so easy to get fed up. It’s so easy to get frustrated when this world isn't living up to our expectations, our hopes, our ideals.

But God saw that it was good.

Yes, mentally we know that the beauty of this earth abounds, that the goodness of creation and created surround us.

But what about when we can’t feel it?

What about when feel like Job, who was so fed up with the troubles of this earth that he wished not to just erase his birth from history but to stop that day from ever dawning. “Yes, let that night be barren,” he cries, “let no joyful cry be heard in it!” He pleads for an undoing of God’s creation, saying “Let that day be darkness!” using the same Hebrew verb that God speaks in “Let there be light.” As if to say, “If I can’t find the goodness in this world, then what is it good for?”

Now, I sincerely hope that none of us have been so desperate as to wish for an undoing of God’s creation, yet I think behind it lies a very natural human tendency to treat the world as if it were created for us. It is true, of course, that God blesses us with the gifts of creation, gifts that not only bring us joy but allow the basis of our very existence, but the earth’s value doesn't lie in what it can provide for us. The earth is valuable because it is God’s good work - work that God continues to maintain and value. Nature was not created to serve humanity; instead, humanity was created to care for nature as a way of serving God. While the creation narratives have often been misused to justify and encourage exploitation of the earth, Steven Bouma-Prediger states that “to till the earth means to serve it for its own sake. To keep the earth means to caringly guard it the way that God blesses and keeps his people.”

But here, again, is where I get fed up. Blessed with immense power and opportunity on this earth, we have abused it - we have not borne God’s image well. This can well lead to despair, similar to that of Job’s. Everywhere we turn, we are slapped in the face with ways in which we have made a mess of this world, harming the earth and those on it. When reading the litany of human and environmental suffering, it’s hard not to wonder if we have even started to drive out God. Author Roger Gottlieb asks: “How am I to feel joy in existence when existence is such a mess? And if I cannot feel that, all in all, this world - despite everything - is holy, then what kind of religious life will I be left with?”
What we are left with is what God leaves Job with. God illustrates to Job the scope and magnificence of the earth, talking of the wild ass and ox who serve no human and of the rain and life God brings to land that Job has never imagined and that no human will ever see. God doesn’t give Job a reason for his suffering but does take him beyond it. Creation is as good as it is vast.

Perhaps that is the lesson of Earth Day, indeed, the lesson of Easter: God continually fills the world with newness and life and light, even when we can’t see it, even we ignore it, even when we can’t accept it because we’re just so fed up. In every drop of rain or ray of sun, in every bird that sings or tulip that blooms before our eyes, God’s love and grace are present, calling and inviting us again and again to take notice and rejoice.

But when about when that tulip refuses to bloom? What about when creation itself seems to be mocking us? Here in Illinois, we accept that we will likely have several months of winter to live through, the season stretching longer than is ever pleasant. But I’m sure I’m not the only one who’s just had it this year. Enough is enough, Mother Nature! Between personal struggles, national discontent, and global problems, we’ve got enough to drag us down. Yes, I know that in the bulb, there is a flower, but that flower should have long ago appeared. How long can we trust in that spring that is still waiting to be? We’re fed up with waiting.

But God saw that it was good.

The birds don’t keep us waiting.

Do you remember when you first heard the birds sing? Did you notice the first time the songs of spring caught your ear this year? At this point, the robins, the iconic birds of spring, have been around for a while, and my, they’ve had a time of it. Even these wild beasts of the air haven’t all been able to survive the effects of drawn-out winter - the cold that chills them to the bone and the snow and ice that keeps them from their food supply.

But weeks before these robins appeared, while we were yet dreaming of far-off warm places, of springtimes long ago and not yet present, there were birds singing right here, all around us. I look forward to the day each year when I first notice the bird song. On that day, I wake up to the promise of spring.

And yet on that day each year, and especially this year, it’s still obviously winter. The calendar, the temperature, and the landscape have been unarguable testaments to that fact.
Faced with this contrast, I looked up who these birds were and what made them sing so early. Here's what I found:

From the gospel, the good news, of National Geographic:

For some, the magic moment happened a week ago. For others, it happened just the other day. Many are still waiting, but some morning soon they too will wake to the lilt of a backyard bird pleading for a mate.

Chickadees will whistle "Phoebe," nuthatches will honk like a tinny horn, titmice will screech "Peter, Peter, Peter," and woodpeckers will hammer out their heart's desire with their beaks against hollow branches.

"These are all winter birds. It's still winter, but the light, the changing light, has a hormonal trigger, and that starts the birdsong," said John Mitchell, an editor with the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Mitchell said the singing of the winter-resident birds is among the first signs that spring is around the corner. Birders begin to report the sounds in the middle weeks of February.

John Dunning, an ecologist at Purdue University, said birds have photoreceptors in the bases of their brains that record the length of the dark period each day. As the darkness shortens, and as days lengthen, birds get spring fever.

"The photoperiod is very standard from year to year," he said.

"Days lengthen at a regular pace." Therefore, using the photoperiod to gauge the season is more reliable than, say, following cues such as an emergence of insects or a freshly sprouting plant, which could easily be fooled by a midwinter warm spell.

The first birds to sing of the pending arrival of spring are the same birds that never left for the winter, Mitchell said.

"They have millions of years of evolution learning to survive the winter. They're here because they know how to do it. Other species don't know how, so they go south."

The winter residents survive by adapting to the available food. Nuthatches will scour the crevices of tree bark in search of insect eggs and grubs, for example. Chickadees feast on seeds. Woodpeckers hammer away at trees to fish out insects sleeping away the winter."
[Woodpeckers] are well adapted to drill and excavate insects from deep within trees," Mitchell said. "They must look at a little pinhole and say, There must be something in there—and then they drill it out."

There are a couple of elements that fascinate me about this simple article. First, we humans are both fooled and encouraged by signs that are the most obvious and also the most deceiving. We may feel that spring isn’t here until it’s noticeably warmer or until the trees are in bloom or until bright floral colors are popping out of the dirt. And we’ll moan and groan until the signs that matter to us show up. And yet these signs may be gone two days after they appear.

Birds are much wiser than we are. For they welcome spring based on the light, the changing light. The light that can be relied upon and trusted. The light that creeps in so slowly and at such a small level that it often escapes our notice at first.

And then there’s this: “The first birds to sing of the pending arrival of spring are the same birds that never left for the winter…. These are all winter birds. It's still winter.”

It’s not a fresh, light-hearted bird brought in to herald the promise of spring – it’s the same bird who has been here all along, battered by winter’s storms, perhaps bruised and broken by the experience. But transformed by the changing light within.

I’ve been thinking about the winter birds I’ve encountered in my work. Those people that persist through the cold and the dark, even when they must surely feel fed up, sustained by a light and a song within them. I think about Markus Gamache, our liaison with the Nigerian Church of the Brethren, who has persisted in the ways of love despite so much violence, be it through giving up comfort and sharing his home with up to 50 displaced persons or through his efforts to bring Muslims and Christians together in shared community. I think about Linda Shank, who each year for five years, despite significant health challenges, returned to North Korea to preach a form of reconciliation through her very presence.

I’m sure we all have winter birds in our work and in our lives, if we stop to think and notice.

What’s more, we are each called to be winter birds.

To refer to a bit of more traditional scripture, hear these words from the apostle Paul in the fifth chapter of 1 Thessalonians:

But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining
salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Paul, and the community of Thessalonians to whom he is writing, were close enough to Jesus’ lifetime that they expected his return in a concrete, foreseeable future, in their own lifetimes. So much so that Paul preached to be careful in case Christ surprisingly showed up and you were drunk. The return was eagerly awaited because it would signal the new reign of God, where peace and justice would rule and suffering would end. And the Thessalonians knew suffering.

What Paul tries to tell them, though, is that the reign of God was already here, already but not yet. Jesus preached, through word and deed, that the Kingdom of God had begun, and that it persisted each time people acted in love, mercy, hospitality, generosity, and community. This kingdom was beautiful and real, all the more so because it existed in the midst of the world’s kingdom – one of greed and fear and violence and injustice.

And so it is today. At some point, a point that is obviously much later in coming that Paul believed, God’s kingdom will reach fulfillment, and each of us and all of creation will be renewed and transformed. And yet still the same birds. We will be winter birds, in and at one with the new and completed Spring.

Until that time, however, we are called to be winter birds in a world that is still winter. In Paul’s words, we’re called to live as children of the day even when all around us seems like night. In National Geographic’s words, we’re called to be like the chickadee, adapting to the winter around us and finding strength where we can. Finding peace and energy in our current surroundings without giving in to the drudgery or cynicism. Called to be like the woodpecker, looking at something tiny or insignificant or mundane, and saying “There must be something in there.”

Weeks after the March for our Lives event, I keep wishing I’d engaged in more conversation with the woman who’d asked me why I took part. I don’t know any of her story except that she’d driven all the way in from Sycamore to participate. What I do know are the words she left me with as she got into her car: “I really hope that someday soon you won’t have to be fed up.”

This earth doesn’t always feel like the ‘almost heaven’ John Denver would have us believe. But this earth IS always better than what our pettiness keeps trying to make it. It always is better than we can comprehend.

We are winter birds, still in a winter world. But we have a spring song, sourced from the light of Christ, that light that never fails, as it continues to change and grow in our hearts. Let us sing it, for God saw that it was good.