Reading the Signs

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Texts:  
 Luke 12: 49-56  
 Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

[The Zoom recording does not begin until several minutes into the teaching, below.]

Good morning! I wish that I could be there in person this morning, but I have a bad cold (and actually just this morning tested positive for Covid). So anyways, here we are.

These are powerful scriptures today! Being a more gentle, calm, abiding-energy kind of person, I am feeling a little out of my comfort zone to reflect on these, but perhaps that’s what God had in mind? Matthias, would probably be better adept to speak on these passages, but here I am.

The Church of the Saviour is not a place for fair-weather Christians. When I started attending this church it became clear pretty early on that this is a special place that strives to go deeper in spirituality, call, community, and activism. I’ve struggled/journeyed to learn what that means for me, while being supported by this loving community. Sometimes, I have felt more similar to the vineyard in the Isaiah passage that was given everything and yielded only wild grapes in return. However, I know that’s an intense metaphor and don’t want to pile too much guilt on myself! But, being a young person in this ‘community of saints’ can be a little intimidating sometimes — am I really producing enough fruit? I’m also the youngest of three girls in my family (and the second youngest of four children) and relate somewhat with the stereotype of the spoiled youngest child. I’ve definitely been given much and benefit from white privilege — there is much to do to uncover that and learn.

The First Nations version, which was read from for the Hebrews and Luke passages in English (it is not yet available in Spanish), illuminated to me the perspective of First Nations (or American Indian) peoples and how they relate to the long story of Christianity. I almost didn’t want the Hebrews passage to be read in that translation because of the graphic descriptions of the hurt and oppression they experienced. And as a white American, this oppression is part of my heritage.

In the Luke passage, Jesus tries to emphasize to his followers the radicalness of his message. You get the sense that he is using very powerful language to get their attention and wake them up! "Do you look for me to bring peace to this land? No! I tell you, first there will be great conflict. The message I bring will pierce like the blade of a long knife. It will even separate family members.” (Luke 12:51-52a) We do have great conflict in the world today. It’s easy to ask, Is it ever really going to get better? I’m so grateful for Megan’s teaching last week and her work and witness working with the immigrant community in the DC area. She inspired me to really do something more, and that our work, even though it may seem like an insignificant task (like sorting clothes) does make a difference. It can be hard when the need is so enormous to feel like what we’re doing matters at all.

However, Creator Sets Free (Jesus), uses our work no matter how flawed we are – like the example of Rahab in the Hebrews passage, letting in the enemy spies into her home and being spared from death when the walls of her town came down.

I’m also struck by the irony of the Luke passage talking about how the people can read the signs of the weather but not the signs of the spirit.

“Creator Sets Free (Jesus) then said to the crowd, "When a cloud rises in the west, you say, 'It will rain soon,' and so it does. The wind blows from the south and you say, 'It will be a hot day,' and so it is."

*Then he spoke to the spiritual leaders*, "You who wear false faces! You understand what the earth, wind, and sky are saying, but you are blind to the message of the season you live in." (Luke 12:54-56, First Nations Version)

[This is where the [Zoom recording](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/play/lnxchhg-hkpn9uavaR8qqaX-bkliL_6Wkr_7IUZ4bqrOhBWfss2D0PFbqdnLvXtSaA0jcB3LQkvlLG5I.J6qG8iEKOS2c6E6H) begins]

While I think our culture is pretty oblivious to reading the ‘message of the season we live in,’ many are quite informed of our political, social, environmental, and cultural issues. However, do those people actually know how to read the signs of the weather?! Do I know how to read the signs of the weather?! We live in a society that is increasingly disconnected from either the ways of the natural world OR from the manmade, consumeristic driven efforts of the 21st century. I do not necessarily believe that technology is bad (I am certainly dependent on it this morning!) or that being well informed about current events is bad either, but both need to be paired with spiritual depth. It seems that being outdoors more naturally leads to connection with God, but that is not necessarily true for everyone. There are certainly big divisions in our society that we are all too aware of; however, are we aware of those divisions within ourselves? What are good and right divisions, and what are merely excuses or just ways we live our lives to avoid interacting with those we think would question our ‘more right’ ways. Many of us may need to hear this message, and others may already wrestle with these questions and put themselves in these tougher situations that confront your own ways of being.

While we were in Germany, we got the chance to learn about some different ways of being as relative outsiders. We lived on the campus of the small school that Matthias attended for one semester. About half of the people who lived in the building with us were refugees from other countries. The school made efforts to connect with these people/families, help them learn German, and connect them with various services (which the government also provides). From our perspective, there were more efforts that could have been made to help them feel a part of the community – if they wanted, but it was cool for us to see how this model could work.

Another very compelling thing that we learned about is the German Kindergarten system. What they call kindergarten is really what we call preschool, ages 3-6. Kindergartens in Germany are free and provide lots of support to families. They offer classes in parenting, birthing, breastfeeding, nutrition for children, general health, and even German language classes for parents (and probably more things that I couldn’t read because they were posted about in German). Every child from the age of three is guaranteed a spot in a Kindergarten, regardless of citizenship or legal status. We even received a piece of mail towards the end of our time there, explaining how to sign Nathan up for Kindergarten. Another family with a daughter about Nathan’s age connected us with a Kindergarten that had a kids’ play time twice a week for children from infants to three. We went with him and were welcomed and enjoyed the open play space and other families and even learned some German nursery rhymes.

The German government also gives every family about $200/month for each child they have, up until about the age of 16. Maternity leave is generally one year, fully paid, and then up to two additional years, unpaid, but your job is guaranteed to be held for you if you want to return. Children are very celebrated in their culture and many places one might need to go to, have a little children’s play area in the corner or something, and kids aren’t seen as a nuisance or disturbance.

This left Matthias and I quite critical of the American ‘system’ if you can even call it that. While we have felt very supported in having Nathan and caring for him, with the very generous help from this community – truly! It is hard to imagine how we would’ve managed these past two years without this community. However, I know that what we have is pretty rare. Some people have the support of their families, but here in DC, many people do not have family close by when they have children. Postpartum depression is common, especially during the pandemic, and many working mothers are asked to do the impossible of being a loving, attentive mother and excellent at their jobs – working fulltime.

In an article titled, “[Parenting in the Desert, Not the Village](https://imagocenterdc.com/parenting-in-the-desert-not-the-village/)”, Esperanza Pombo reflects on the difficulty of having children in the US, especially when compared with the ways of caring for children and parents in many other parts of the world:

When I moved to the US, I knew I was giving up many things for a better career. I would miss the food back home, my former lifestyle, and, most of all, my family. What I didn’t know was that this feeling would resurface years later, during my pregnancy. The sentence “it takes a village” highlighted the cruel truth that, in a postpartum world, women have been stripped of the support system to care for their children and themselves during a decisive moment for both or their lives.

Although pregnancy can be a moment of joy and satisfaction for many new moms, it can also be clouded by an aura of anxiety and uncertainty as we navigate the many obstacles moms encounter when bringing a new person into this world.

The US is the only developed economy that does not offer paid parental leave. In fact, Oman, Papua New Guinea, and the US are the only countries in the world that fail to offer paid leave to new mothers. Therefore, it is not surprising to see how employers across the states offer resistance when women mention the topic of maternal leave. In the best scenarios, women find themselves dragged into “flexible” arrangements in which they agree to work remotely after giving birth in order to get some telework “privileges” when the leave is up.

Not having the option to care for their child leaves mothers delegating some of their parenting and the care of their child to others, be it the other parent, a family member, or paid services. This decision is often accompanied with guilt and shame as well as countless headaches when it comes to making motherhood compatible with the rest of roles a woman takes on today.

According to [Child Care Aware of America](https://www.childcareaware.org/), childcare in the US now costs more than $10,000 a year. I smile ruefully at this number, knowing that childcare in the urban areas can go well beyond $30,000 a year. The experience of parents in urban settings is vastly different from the 7% of household income designated for childcare as recommended by the US Department of Health and Human Services. Early age childcare is not guaranteed in the District of Columbia. Expectant mothers put themselves on childcare waitlists in their first trimester. This is an unthinkable solution in many cultures where beliefs linked to pregnancy and parenting are compassion and family centric.

While I was already interested in working towards better parental leave and support of families with young children, I’m even more inspired from our experience in Germany. The solutions for the US will likely need to be different than the German system, but it can surely be better. We should be proud that DC is one of nine states in the US that offers some form of paid parental leave. The other states are California, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Washington, Connecticut, and Oregon. DC offers eight weeks of partially paid leave for new parents. There is also the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) which requires companies of more than fifty employees to give employees up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave for the birth of a child, adoption of a child, a serious medical condition, or to care for a spouse, child, or parent (NOT a grandparent, grandchild, or sibling) with a serious medical condition. However, the person seeking the benefit has to have worked for that employer for at least twelve months prior to receiving the leave, have worked at least 1,250 hours (or approximately twenty-four hours a week), and be at the physical worksite where at least fifty employees work within seventy-five miles. I’ve also recently learned that one can only access this leave once in a two-year period, so if one took this leave for a child born in 2020, they could not access the leave again until two years since the end of that leave.

Anyone who has had a child I think knows that even twelve weeks of leave is not enough. When we told our German friends that many parents in the US end up putting their children in daycare when they are eight or twelve weeks old they were shocked. One person even said, “I think that’s illegal in Germany!” And it may be, I haven’t looked into that yet.

We also learned about a new type of Kindergarten that is growing in popularity in Germany, and in the US – Wild Kindergarten, or Outdoor Kindergarten. This has become increasingly popular due to Covid but is compelling for many other reasons. Time outdoors is good for all people and especially children in the early phases of development and education. In these outdoor preschools, kids spend the majority of their time outside, no matter the weather. They go to parks or other natural areas, led by teachers with particular ecological knowledge. As many parents are forced to choose between online learning or putting their children at risk of getting covid for an in-person experience, this is a compelling alternative.

From the [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/18/t-magazine/germany-forest-kindergarten-outdoor-preschool-waldkitas.html)

[Robin Hood Waldkindergarten](http://www.robinhoodwald.de/), which opened in 2005, is one of more than 1,500 *waldkitas,* or “forest kindergartens,” in Germany; Berlin alone has about twenty. Most have opened in the last fifteen years and are usually located in the city’s parks, with a bare-bones structure serving as a sort of home base, but others, like Robin Hood, rely on public transportation to shuttle their charges daily out into the wilderness, where they spend most of the day, regardless of weather. Toys, typically disparaged at *waldkitas*, are replaced by the imaginative use of sticks, rocks and leaves. A 2003 Ph.D. dissertation by Peter Häfner at Heidelberg University showed that graduates of German forest kindergartens had a “clear advantage” over the graduates of regular kindergartens, performing better in cognitive and physical ability, as well as in creativity and social development.

The American journalist Richard Louv, who coined the term “nature-deficit disorder” in his 2005 book, “[Last Child in the Woods](https://www.workman.com/products/last-child-in-the-woods),” is cited often by Robin Hood staff, as is “[Coyote’s Guide to Connecting With Nature](http://owlinkmedia.com/2010/09/featured-product-coyotes-guide-2nd-edition/),” by Jon Young, Ellen Haas and Evan McGown. (“[Savage Park](http://www.hmhco.com/shop/books/Savage-Park/9780544570207),” by Amy Fusselman, is another book that chronicles uninhibited play and was inspired by a visit to an adventure playground in Tokyo.) The pedagogical philosophy of *waldkitas*, which privileges outdoor play and hands-on environmental learning, comes originally from Scandinavia, but, as one teacher put it to me, “they don’t make a big fuss about it like they do here.” The trend’s non-Teutonic origins are somewhat surprising: There might be nothing “more German” than a state-funded preschool based primarily in a forest.

Germany has nearly three times as much protected land as the US, proportionate to the countries’ sizes, a nontrivial fact that highlights the way much of the country thinks about nature and its role in the emotional health of its citizens. “It’s terrible that kids today know all about technology but nothing about the little bird outside their window,” Peters said, gesturing out toward the woods and sounding like any number of quotable Germans, from Goethe to Beethoven to Bismarck, all of whom have rhapsodized on the psychic benefits of spending time in the forest. He continued: “In life, bad things happen — you lose your job or your partner or everyone just hates you — but you’ll always have this.”

There are also many of these preschools popping up in the US and the numbers are growing. In the US the movement is also grounded in native ecological wisdom and practices. Here is an excerpt from Kit Harrington’s (teacher) [opening remarks](https://naturalstart.org/feature-stories/education-context-role-place-nature-based-early-childhood-education) at the 2017 Nature-Based Preschool Conference.

I am very passionate about what I do, and it is easy for me to get caught up in sharing stories about the exciting “new” trend of outdoor preschool. Recently, I had the good fortune of speaking with Warren King George about my work and the conference, and he shared with me a story that stopped me in my tracks. Warren explained how Mother Nature provided his classroom too as a child, and how he learned from teaching stations that were in fact the rivers, and the beaches, and the lakeshores, and the mountaintops of this land. At a young age, Warren was taught the lesson of the trees, the way in which there are many kinds of trees that live so close to one another that their branches and their roots grow and intertwine together. He was taught that although these trees are remarkably different – some go to sleep in the winter and others are awake all year round, some grow tall and some shed their leaves – all of them live in harmony among each other. He learned that these trees are the most powerful teacher that nature provides. That they provide us with everything from the air for our lungs and food for our bellies to heat and clothing to keep us warm. We walk under their leaves and sit under their shade and do nothing for them in return, yet they continue to provide for us. Warren taught me that as a child he learned, just as his ancestors had learned for thousands of years, to pay attention to the tree people, to embrace what they have to share, and to encourage others to do the same.

We are all propelled, to some degree, by an instinctive understanding that nature is the ultimate teacher. She is dynamic, diverse, and beyond our control; providing our children with endless opportunities for learning and growth. Just like the trees, she asks nothing of us in return, and continues to give. Anyone who has watched a student discover the hidden world in a patch of moss, or call back to a barred owl, or help a friend to navigate across a downed log, knows just how important and meaningful this experience can be. It’s why we spend our nights, and our weekends, at the office, or the kitchen table, learning new things and dreaming up new curricula. It’s why we head out into the rain, and the snow, and the mud, instead of sticking to the relative warmth and security of a classroom.

And it’s a good thing, too, because deep in our hearts, we all know that there is more work to be done. In the forest, the diversity of an ecosystem is a measure of its health. Biodiversity is a requirement for balance in the systems underlying all living things. Yet our classrooms don’t reflect the diversity that we rely upon in our outdoor spaces. Despite understanding better than anyone that the magic and wonder of the forest is something that *all* children deserve access to, nature-based preschool has, so far, been limited to a select population. If we want to change this, we are going to have to be ready to put in the hard work, and the critical self-reflection, that this change requires. We can begin by striving to understand where we are now and what cultural rhizomes underlie our place. We must strive to be humble as we explore the question of who we are and where we want to be.

 And I think that where we want to be doesn’t end at the bounds of our classroom, or the edge of the forest. It continues into the homes of the families we serve, into their language and traditions, their experiences and surroundings, as well as the resources they can access. When we welcome a child into our classroom, there is a whole world that comes with them, and to choose to focus only on the experiences we have together is to limit the impact those experiences will have. If we truly want to make nature-based education meaningful and accessible for all children and families, we must strive to approach education in the context of not just the class, or the forest, but the place, this entire remarkable world of which we are all a part.

 So, where does this leave us? I’m inspired to work towards better parental leave policies for families in the US, for all AND more support for families, particularly with young children. AND to work towards more equitable outdoor preschools for children in our area. And certainly to think about how to include children at 8th Day. There is already momentum around these things. In a small search we have found a new preschool (opening in the Deanwood neighborhood of Ward 7, this Fall) whose mission is:

The mission of [DC Wildflower Public Charter School](https://www.dcwildflowerpcs.org/about-us) (DCWPCS) is to serve a larger, universal purpose in eliminating racial and social discrimination and hierarchy – and offer an intimate liberatory educational experience. We believe intentionally small, community embedded, teacher-led Montessori learning environments will accelerate the journey for students of the global majority to be and feel safe, seen and heard. DCWPCS is where students’ identities are affirmed and their genius unleashed!

​The Riverseed School prioritizes the well-being of the whole child—mind, body, senses, and spirit—with an emphasis on connection to nature. Riverseed is committed to trusting, respecting, and empowering children to be active participants in their own education and being a space where they can bring their whole selves every day.

I hope that this strikes a chord with some folks this morning. I’m so grateful for the children among us, and for this loving community that embraces them. Amen.