

*Order of Service -- June 11, 2017
The Law, the Prophets, Seasons and Stones*

Musical Prelude

Greeting -- Song of the Builders, Mary Oliver

1st Hymn: This is My Father's World, Green 29

Readings -- Romans 8:28; Matthew 22:34-40; Ecclesiastes 3:1-5; 14-15

2nd Hymn: Lady of the Seasons' Laughter, Green 241

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- All things work together for good

3rd Hymn: I am an Acorn; Green 242

Message: The Law, the Prophets, Seasons and Stones

Silent worship

4th Hymn: Turn, Turn, Turn; Blue 28

Closing -- This is God's Glorious World.

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting:

Good morning Friends. I begin today with ***Song of the Builders, by Mary Oliver***

On a summer morning I sat down on a hillside

To think about God -- a worthy pastime.

Near me, I saw a single cricket;

it was moving the grains of the hillside this way and that way.

How great was its energy, how humble its effort.

Let us hope it will always be like this,

each of us going on in our inexplicable ways building the universe.

In praise of this almost summer morning, and in gratitude for all the unseen energies and humble efforts it takes to build the Universe, let us sing together our first hymn, from the ***Green hymnal, This is My Father's World, number 29.***

Readings

Romans 8:28 *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

Matthew 22:34-40 *When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”³⁷ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

Ecclesiastes 3:1 -15

³To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: ²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time harvest; ³a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together...I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. ¹⁵That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

Second Hymn: Lady of the Seasons' Laughter, Green 241

Prayer

Holy God, the whole world on this almost summer morning declares your praise. Rocks and trees, skies and seas on this turning earth reveal you. So we come together today to sit for a moment, to think of you...in the midst of our great energies, our humble efforts we pray that it be as the poets and the prophets and the songmakers proclaim that all things work together for good. We pray that our seasons in this age be added to that good. May we remember to be called to your purpose, to love, in all the times, in all the seasons, in all the turnings. Hold us in your steady mercy, God who is father and mother, God in whom we live and move and have our being. From age to age, from season to season, Amen.

Third Hymn: I am an Acorn, Green 242

Fourth Hymn: Turn, Turn, Turn, Blue 28

Benediction

The Whole of the Law and the Prophets is Love.

May all our seasons be faithful to this legacy entrusted to us.

May this commission laid upon us guide our own great energies and humble efforts in God's Glorious World.

In every turning, every age, every year, every season, May we know our unfolding is carved in God's hand. May it be so, that all things work together for the good, for those who love.

Message

When I first began coming to this meeting, I was working as a vegetable farmer. Our first season, we needed to establish another garden bed. As we were creating this bed, we discovered what seemed to be a buried rock wall, likely built a hundred years earlier, as people cleared the land. With this discovery, we modified our plans, but we did end up moving a small part of the wall, and as we did, we thought of those other hands, long dead, who had once lifted and moved these same rocks, with purpose and determination and plans much like ours. We talked as we worked, about how time and maybe other ensuing decisions by other people covered over their labor, how we uncovered it, how their industriousness and their vision for this particular patch of earth was now unknown to us, and could only be guessed at, as we undid what they had done. I wondered, if the rocks could talk, what they would say? If there is a Sacred Presence alive in all things, *That of God* in air, water, rocks, does it think “here we go again” as it is gathered and cast away in turns? Is it interested, watching, bearing witness? Is it amused, watching us do one thing and then another? Does it know where all these combined, seemingly-at-cross-purposes efforts across the ages are headed? Or is it waiting, patient, to find out what happens next?

The impressions of that day and that task have stayed with me in the years since, and came back to me again as George and I used an excavator to dig a drainage trench recently. The internal combustion engine made light work of moving earth and rocks that could have been in the same place for literally thousands of years. And once again I found myself wondering what they would tell me if they could speak. What is the perspective of That Which Has Been Present for an unfathomable stretch of Present Moments strung together into thousands, maybe millions of years? What does that Presence know about the legacies entrusted to us and the legacies we leave, that we entrust in our turn, to those who come after us?

I’ve been pondering the etymology of the word legacy this month, watching the current leaders of our country using the moment that’s been given to them in part to undo what’s been understood to be the legacy of the previous leaders. Whatever your perspective on that legacy, I’ve been thinking about how undoing one another’s legacies seems to be part of our species’ long evolution, part of what I did, when I moved that hidden rock wall.

The root of the word legacy is related to the root of the word legal, from the Latin *lex*, or law, meaning an enactment; a precept or principle, a rule. Legacy and law are also related to the latin *legere* “to gather, to bind, to cohere” which is present

in the meaning of the word religion, to re-bind, to re-gather. The verb form and its compounds also all have a meaning which involves a task or an assignment. A legate in the late 14th century English was an "ambassador, envoy, deputy," who is "sent with a commission, a messenger with a task, such as an authorized representative of the Pope" or those with power derived from the law, said the online etymology dictionary that I consulted. The usual Old French forms invoked meanings related to loyalty, to law-abiding and honorable behavior, to faithfulness. Taken all together, the linguistic heritage of these words suggests that our ancestors understood the Law to be something that coheres and gathers. a legacy, meanwhile, is the way our individual lives are in relationship to that gathering, that coherence, and both serve as a commission, a task that is handed down to us, binding us with and to others, to our ancestors and our descendents.

These days, that commission asks us to be faithful even and especially when it seems like we trample unwittingly and sometimes deliberately, not just on the legacies of those who preceded us, but also on the legacy that those who come after us will inherit. There is a fervent prayer throughout the Bible, in both Testaments, that it be true that all things work together to the good, even when it seems as if they are not. Matthew 22 is a chapter from this long prayer, and in it, the Sadducees and the Pharisees are testing the rabbi Jesus on how well he understands the legacy he has been given, and how faithful he is. The Jews were a persecuted religious minority. Competing Theologies arose to try to explain why this would be so, when they were being faithful to the legacy of their tradition, the Law, the Torah, That which Bound them one to another, that which cohered them as one people in God. The Sadducees and the Pharisees wrestled with these realities and consulted the legacy of their tradition in different ways, which yielded different convictions, different beliefs, often in direct opposition to one another, to explain and frame their persecution, and to remain faithful in the face of it.

The Pharisees, were mostly middle-class Jews who emphasized the exact keeping of the law as it had been interpreted by sages, elders, and rabbis. This was known as the Oral Law, codified and written down in what became known as the Talmud, a record of the conversation the tradition had been having with itself, the wisdom that had developed and been passed down. Politically, the Pharisees were ardently opposed to the influence of Greek and Roman culture. The word Pharisee is derived from Hebrew word meaning to separate, and the Pharisees believed that Judaism needed to be preserved from outside threats. They had stringent rules regarding prayer, fasting, festival observance, and tithing. As tensions grew, the depth of the Pharisees' commitment to the Law and to God would weaken into a

religious formalism and contempt for those who didn't meet their standards of behavior.

The Sadducees, meanwhile, were mostly members of the wealthy conservative elite. They wanted to maintain the power and influence of the priestly class, which allowed them privileges and riches far beyond what the average person enjoyed. They were also willing to incorporate the influence of Greek culture and commerce into their lives, something the Pharisees stridently opposed, and were often seen to be pawns of the Roman Empire, corrupt and self-serving. The Sadducees were what could be called Torah originalists -- they rejected the idea of the tradition of the Oral Law, that body of collected interpretations by rabbis and sages and they insisted on a literal interpretation of the Written Law, a fundamentalist, "pure letter-of-the-law" reading of the Torah. They denied such concepts as resurrection, personal immortality, or other ideas that were only found in the Oral tradition, beliefs the Pharisees affirmed and used to explain and weather the current troubles, which seemed to all to be heading to a boiling point.

There were other factions, too, like the Zealots and the Essenes, and Jesus lived at the center of this raging contentiousness and seething hostility, where extreme inequality, poverty, and the hegemonic violence of the empire complicated questions like What is the Law for?

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann argues that there are three major parts of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Torah/Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom literature, and they correspond metaphorically to stages of spiritual growth, in individual and collective life, and in the life of the faith community as it is represented in the people called Israel. The Torah, or the first five books, chronicles the period in which the people of Israel were given their identity through the law, tradition, structure, a sense of chosenness, belovedness. It's the strong foundation, the beginning. The second major section of the Hebrew Scriptures is called the Prophets and it's here that critical self-awareness dawns. Prophetic thinking is the capacity for healthy self-criticism, the ability to recognize, as the prophets did for Israel, our culpability and complicity in patterns of injustice, in collective and self-delusion, in blind spots that mask our own hypocrisy and failure to live out what we say we believe. Healthy self-criticism modeled by the prophetic tradition helps to reform and gentle the ways that the strong, secure grounding in the tradition can harden into tribal thinking, and rigid dualisms that box the world into us vs. them. The third section of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Wisdom Literature, and in it a way of thinking is suggested that marries the strong foundation of the Torah, the Law, to the radical vision of the Prophets and yields compassion, insight, the

ability to straddle paradox and seeming contradictions, to embrace mystery, forgiveness, and patience.

And patience is where I think again of the rocks, and of Jesus. Because in this famous passage, when Jesus is pressed, the Second Testament authors have him standing firmly on the foundation of tradition, acting as a prophet, and articulating the understanding of wisdom, when he says, the essence of all the tradition, the legacy and the law, is love. And today, 2 thousand years later, it's our turn to stand upon tradition, to bring the prophet's radical critique, to speak from the perspective of wisdom. There are no straight and easy comparisons to pinpoint the Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots and Essenes of today, though there are parallels. We, too straddle great contentiousness. We too have an ongoing argument about what the Law entails, and what it's for. We too have those who are wary of foreigners and those who welcome them, those who try to get along with the conquerors and those who resist. We too have competing theologies. Violence and extreme inequality complicate our questions of what binds us, coheres us one to another, to those who came before and those who come after.

And so we find ourselves moving rocks from pile to pile. We gather in one year and cast away in the next. We build up and we tear down. We stumble into the legacy that others leave, grateful and oblivious in turns. We leave a legacy, sometimes with intention, and often carelessly, and either way we entrust it. We go on in our inexplicable ways, building the Universe, lying down in the grass on a summer day, to think about God. And we believe though we do not know for sure, that this is a worthy occupation, that indeed, all things work together for the good, for those who love, and that the whole of the Law and the Prophets hang upon that greatest of the commandments, that greatest of all the legacies, the commission and task we receive from a power greater than ourselves, we hope, and God willing, we pass it on.