

Fly Loose

Isaiah 65:17-25; Revelation 21:1-6; John 3:1-10

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 14) 2024

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*Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.*

-Jan Richardson, “Blessing When the World Is
Ending”

You can always have your way if you have enough ways.

-Cameron Trimble

Youth Pastor Talitha Amadea Aho remembers the first time she felt like it was the end of the world. She was a student at the State University of New York and living at home in Manhattan. She was majoring in music and the university was in the midst of serious financial cutbacks. Many of her classes and all of her ensembles were deemed unessential and were going to be cut. She was very upset.

Around the dinner table her parents were attempting to console her. “You can shift majors, or you can go to another school” and so on. She said that the worst was her jazz band she was in was going to be cut. She started crying.

“Hey, hey, calm down,” her dad said. “It’s not the end of the world.”

Oh no, she didn’t like that. The jazz band was the center of her little world. It included most of her best friends and took up many hours of her leisure time. It was a big deal to her.

She remembers that she burst into tears, “It *is* the end of the world to me!” as she slammed her hands down so hard on the table that all the dishes rattled.

“Okay,” her dad muttered. “Maybe it is. Maybe it is.”

She sighed. There was a pause.

Then her dad said, “But there will be a new heaven and a new earth.”

Aho said that she left the table silently and went to her room, not yet ready to be consoled. But the next day, while riding the bus to school, she wrote in her journal, “All things have to die and be mourned for, and even if this is the end there will be a beginning” (*In Deep Waters: Spiritual Care for Young People in a Climate Crisis*, p. 30-32).

The world is always ending somewhere.

The Scripture readings this morning are all about our worlds are always ending somewhere.

The book of Isaiah is really three books, Book 1 contains chapters 1-39 and is about warning Israel to repent, change its ways and return to God and to God’s ways, and if they don’t, they will reap what they sow; their sin will come back to judge them. Book 2 – chapters 40-55 are addressed to the Jews who have reaped their sin and who are now in exile. Their world of the Temple, the City of God-Jerusalem, and all they believed in and took for granted has ended and they are in exile in Babylon. Book 2 is full of words of comfort and hope and God’s promise that things will someday change. Finally, Book 3 is chapters 56-66 and is written to the recent exiles after they have returned home and discovered that home is not

like what they remembered and pined after. The truth was that only a few returned, and what they returned to was a temple and an economy in shambles.

Chapter 64 says, “Your holy cities have become a wilderness, [the prophet laments]. And Jerusalem a desolation ... all our pleasant places have become ruins” (Isaiah 64:10-11). The “good old days” were over, gone for good.

But then we get to chapter 65 and Isaiah hits a different stride. For me, the image shifts to where the preacher takes it up a notch. His voice takes off into a kind of rhythm and singsong as he begins to imagine a larger picture, one that lies outside the competency of politics or history itself, one that lies beyond our old-world imagination. He is catching the Spirit.

“Hear me, sisters and brothers. All of you whose world has ended, the Lord God, Creator of the Universe, says that someday there will be a new heaven and a new earth. All of you who grieve and are afraid, God says someday the wolf and the lamb will feed together. God says this new day is coming. Someday will be the new day when Israel and the nations will see miracles of peace. Someday the killing will stop. Eradication need not precede redemption. Annihilation will not precede restoration. No! God does not call us to liquidation! God calls us to reconciliation! God calls us to reclamation! God calls us to resurrection! God calls us to live in the new creation! Hear me, sisters and brothers! The old is passing away; behold, the new is coming!”

The people are standing in the middle of the ruins of their world, they are grieving and afraid, but a new world is coming.

Our Gospel reading is that well-known late-night dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a well-read and well-educated religious leader who

is trying to figure how Jesus fits into Nicodemus' world. Jesus tells him, "You can't see or live in the kingdom of God from your world. It doesn't fit. You must give up and let go of your old world and be born into a new one. Quit trying to control this world, instead, relinquish it and stretch your imagination into the something new God is doing."

The world is always ending somewhere. We yearn for the new creation, but it is hard to see.

Yesterday was a scary day. The attempted assassination of the former president is scary. The gun violence scares me. The misinformation and disinformation scare me. Walking the edge of chaos scares me. Everything seems volatile. What kind of world are we in?

This past week, this summer, so far has so many of us around the country and around the world wondering about the ending of our worlds with record-breaking heat, and suddenly intensifying hurricanes in the first week of July. We're all asking, "What's next?" and we know that with climate change and weather disruption, we have much more to come.

Worlds are always ending somewhere. Now what?

The World Climate Research Programme (WCRP) partners with the United Nations and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) doing scientific research on our various but connected global predicaments. One of their projects focuses on what they call "safe landings" exploring various "routes to 'safe landing' spaces for human and natural systems." **Notice the plural: they are searching for *multiple routes to multiple safe landing spaces*.** They are not looking for one perfect route, one magic solution, one silver bullet (Brian

McLaren, *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*, p.175).

Cameron Trimble is a UCC pastor, consultant, and avid pilot. She has a saying that speaks to having multiple routes to safe landing spaces, and the need for flexibility, agility, improvisation, and imagination. She says, **“You can always have your way if you have enough ways.”** Trimble goes on:

Our world today is nothing if not swirling, turbulent wind tossing us around. ... [W]e have experienced economic meltdown, climate countdown, racial throwdown, political breakdown, technology showdown, and religious lowdown. We are living through the breakdown and the breaking open of much that has defined modern life (Cameron Trimble, “In Times of Turbulence, Fly Loose,” in *Oneing*, Spring 2023, p. 35).

Trimble tells about learning to fly. She and her instructor were approaching a storm with a lot of turbulence. He said, “You are about to learn something important about your aircraft. ... If you tighten your grip on the yoke ... You, as the pilot, actually make the flight less safe, steady, and stable. So, remember: **When the going gets rough, fly loose.** ... She went on to explain, “Rather than tightly grasping at single solutions to help us regain a feeling of control, we need to loosen our imagination, so we can imagine multiple ways through the turbulence, multiple routes to multiple safe landings” (“In Times of Turbulence, Fly Loose,” p.35-36, 37).

For us, I think some of what this means is that instead of our tendency to curl in a fetal position of defeat and despair, we start imagining multiple routes to multiple safe landings. We imagine new ways forward.

Perhaps that means renewed activism and political organizing working for a city and state and nation that practices kindness and mercy, justice, and gratitude. But that's only one route. What about others? How can we care for the earth and practice mercy by tending to gardens that not only feed people but also feed our souls? Here we are Austin Heights sitting right on this creek. What if we looked at this creek, this watershed as something for which we are responsible, and our calling is to tend it? Another route: we're already preparing, under the leadership of Maggie Forbes and the Missions Committee and Christina, to house a migrant family and we're going to be finding out more about what that might look like in the next few months or so. Also, there are efforts by many of us in making Nacogdoches a more walkable community, and many of us are working on finding multiple routes of growing community and connectedness all of which are possible multiple safe landings.

Back in 2018 I read James and Deborah Fallows book, *Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America*. The Fallows are both pilots and they flew their single engine plane all over America, especially the so-called flyover parts, except they landed and actually spent days and weeks in the small to medium sized towns that are often flown over by big airlines. Towns like ours and some larger than us. Everywhere they went they asked, "What are the characteristics of thriving towns and how are they working at revitalization? Very quickly let me list some of what they found:

- (1) People worked together.
- (2) Public and Private partnership is real. Local government teamed with private groups together making a local difference.
- (3) They have thriving downtowns.
- (4) They have a university nearby.

(5) They have outstanding local public schools.

(6) They are open to newcomers.

(7) They have big plans.

These are some of the key ingredients they discovered that thriving towns have. And at the end they added another, sort of a ½ characteristic: each thriving town has good micro-breweries. Micro-breweries are more than a beer-drinking place; they are a “third place” where people go to connect, be with friends, hang-out.

My own experience, and the experience of many of you (most of you) is that our own Fredonia Brewery is a thriving, full of energy place, where there are all sorts of people everywhere!

Grace Garrigan and sisters Molly and Ann are working hard at starting a business near the hotel and brewery that will be a kid-friendly-parent gathering place for coffee and conversation. The hope is that it will attract people downtown and be another place to build and nurture community and connectedness, another safe landing.

Participating in multiple routes to multiple safe landings of good work, of ministry, service, care, and connection around us are ways we discover hope. Both hope and imagination grow out of good work. We don't have hope or conjure it up, and then get to work. We see things that need to be done, we get to work, and then hope grows out of the work. While our small works of service and care seem to be feeble compared to the scale of global problems, the French Catholic philosopher Michel de Certeau argues that the everyday practices that people and communities model have the power to subvert unjust systems. Every action makes a difference.

Every action keeps us human. And every action that connects us with each other and the earth are multiple routes toward multiple safe landings.

I'm thinking a lot about the future of Austin Heights. We all know that I'm getting closer and closer to full retirement. I don't know when exactly, but it is coming sooner rather than later. Come the second Sunday in August, Jane and I will have been here 35 years! So, what might multiple routes to multiple safe landings look like here? Rather than a white-knuckle-only-one-way to the future, we need to learn to "fly loose." Over the next year or two, I'm hoping that we can bring in a variety of people who know about such things to help us learn to fly loose and imagine multiple routes and multiple safe landings.

Cameron Trimble says that most churches and organizations do planning at five-year increments. One of the things that she sometimes does is ask congregations to imagine 50 years into future. What might this world, East Texas, and Nacogdoches look like in 2074? And for us, our church community, and our children and grandchildren what will be important and essential? Cameron Trimble says, whatever we think and however we imagine we must nurture and grow connectedness and community and relationships.

As we consider some of these characteristics, we begin to work backwards from 2074 and ask things like, what do we need to start doing now for such a future? How do we raise and train our children and grandchildren to find multiple routes to multiple safe landings? How do we fly loose into the future?

A couple of months ago, Jane and I were in Austin. We were trying to get from the church to our hotel and were following GPS through neighborhoods. I turned down a wrong street and need to turn around. So, I stopped near a suburban house and driveway. There was a woman putting trash in her dumpster, and I

rolled down the window and said, “Mam, I simply need to turn around so can I turn into your driveway and then back out to turn around?” I put all the warmth and smile I could into the request. She just glared at me with hostility as I carefully turned around, barely driving up a few feet into her driveway and backing out. Looking back, I wonder if she would have pulled a gun on me if she had been packing.

Contrast that with this story on Friday from Baptist journalist and minister Mark Wingfield in Dallas, who the previous week had officiated the funeral of a young man and friend who had committed suicide. He wrote a story about it and in response, heard from all sorts of people about their own depression and struggles with thinking about suicide.

Mark says he was sitting at lunch in a restaurant and took a call from a dear friend talking to him about his own depression and thoughts of suicide. Mark listened, offered counsel, and after the call, he said he sat there looking at his half-eaten lunch and he said he *“began to weep. Uncontrollably. Sobbing so hard I could not stop. I was grasping for paper napkins to wipe away the tears when suddenly I sensed a person standing next to me and a hand reaching out across my shoulder.*

To my left, there stood a woman I had seen enter the restaurant after me. She was elegant, poised and calm. She spoke only two words, over and over: ‘Be comforted.’

I explained to her why I was crying, and she said again the same thing, ‘Be comforted.’

Blessed by her calming presence, I composed myself and she returned to her nearby table where she resumed the loving duty I had witnessed her doing before

my crying spell. Accompanying her was her quadriplegic mother or older sister, seated in one of those motorized wheelchairs made especially for such a person.

My comforter had brought her loved one out to lunch and was feeding her because she could not feed herself. Yet sensing my distress, she got up from her table, left her loved one and came to my side.”

We are in turbulent times and the storms are going to get more turbulent. We want to be a people who practice safe landings of mercy and kindness. Who connect, who comfort the grieving, who are centered and grounded in times of anxiety and chaos, and who practice feeding where wolves and lambs can eat together in peace.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.