



Less Really Is More + Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Third Second Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2023
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There is a problem in Isaiah. Or really it was a problem before Isaiah: The world had fallen into imbalance. Once upon a time there was enough of everything for everybody. Everyone lived in perfect harmony. Well, all two people.

Then sin came into the picture through human pride. This has played out ever since in various expressions of jealousy and greed. Those who could grabbed at more. And when one person has more, it follows that others have less.

Power can be exercised humanly or inhumanly, but an excess of the latter over generations, over centuries, meant that countless souls fell under oppression both economically and politically. Of course those areas are intertwined. The rich man in Luke 12 who needed bigger barns wasn't just greedy. He was coldly calculating. By storing up excessive amounts of grain he could create a shortage that would drive up prices. Then he would sell it off at a huge profit and, who knows, buy his way into a powerful appointment. But he never got a chance to reap his rewards, because what happened to him? (God took away his life that very night.)

Today in Isaiah we hear of people who are oppressed, brokenhearted, captives, and in prison. They are mourning, sitting in ashes. They live among ruins. They have been the victims of robbery and wrongdoing. The world is out of balance.

Isaiah was writing here after the people of Israel had returned home from exile in Babylon. Things should have been looking up, right? Instead, they found themselves struggling under deteriorating conditions.

In the absence of strong leadership, rival political factions had sprung up. The crucial temple rebuilding project was going nowhere. People were discouraged and depressed by the sight of their temple still in ruins. At the same time the country was ravaged by drought and crop failure. Concern for the community's future was sacrificed to self-interest. Fear and greed swept in, and people suffered. Whereas in exile they had at least been united in their desire to return home, now their world was totally out of balance.

In today's world we are all too familiar with the human cost of political and economic inequality—those who want more and leave others with less. Is there a fresh way to visualize the imbalance that the thirst for more creates?

You might not have thought of this, but dams provide a powerful illustration.

Dams are built to control water, mainly for purposes of irrigation, generating electricity, and recreation. Who controls water, controls power. But other than severe pollution, nothing has a

greater impact on the health of a river than a dam. By altering the natural flow of water, dams prevent fish migration, alter habitats, disrupt the currents needed to sustain aquatic organisms, and degrade water quality. Without moving water, reservoirs can heat up, affecting sensitive species and leading to lethal algae blooms and decreased oxygen levels.

[Photo of Hoover Dam] Is this not a most unnatural piece of construction?

And as Pennsylvanians know well, as dams they age they can become public safety hazards. I recently devoured David McCullough's exhaustive account of the Johnstown Flood, an epic tragedy rooted entirely in greed and neglect.

Here in Advent we have trying to rise above our day to day timeframe as we strain see from Alpha to Omega, from the beginning of creation to the return of Jesus at the end of time. It is no coincidence that in Scripture the central image in the Omega is flowing water. [SLIDE] "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end," the voice from the throne trumpets in Revelation 21. "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." [SLIDE] And in Revelation 22 the angel shows the prophet the river of the water of life, "bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God." Springs, not stagnant pools. [SLIDE] Flowing rivers, not dams.

In the case of dams, the message is clear: Restore rivers to their natural condition. Yes, dams have been an important source of renewable energy, but hydropower can also be generated simply using the natural flow of a river.

[SLIDES] Even government agencies are realizing that at a large percentage of American dams are no longer serving the purpose for which they were built, and in fact are either harmful or dangerous. One by one they are being removed. The process is laborious but driven by the desire to restore the perfect balance of the web of life as it originally existed.

Whenever people try to secure their well-being without trusting that God has given us all that we need, sooner or later disaster follows. We see this pattern in Holy Scripture right from the get-go. Less really is more.

In the Word made flesh God ripped through the garment of heaven that he had worn since the beginning of time and descended to be with God's suffering people. He came in skin and bone and blood to show us in parables and miracles and through his own death and resurrection that balance has in fact been restored, that every human system driven by greed desire for more which throws things out of whack will ultimately fail. [MARY] "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones," Mary is getting ready to sing, "and the rich he has sent away empty." Not will, but has. It's already done.

What this means is that our waiting is not passive but active. The kingdom is here, and we are called to participate in restoring balance. Today Isaiah proclaims, and John affirms, that this restoration is already underway. We are being called to step into the current. To go with the

flow. To build up your ancient ruins. To raise up former devastations. And when we do, Isaiah says, we will be oaks whose life-giving branches will spread across generations.

The call is clear and strong here on the third Sunday of Advent. Let us, we the people of Grace Lutheran Church, consider anew how we can be oaks of righteousness, plantings of the Lord displaying his glory by trusting that God's abundance really is enough for all.

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to see more clearly our part in the disruption of God's gracious

In the penitential spirit of the color purple, which is interchangeable in Advent with blue, we gain a broader perspective on

To cross the space between heaven and earth. To rip apart the cosmic barrier and descend to be with God's suffering people. To bridge the chasm of silence and hurt.

the renewal of creation through God's gracious movements across time. The saga of dams gives us an exhilarating illustration of this. God created the earth, set things in motion and populated the waters to sustain all life in perfect balance. In the desire to have more – more power, more control, more convenience – humans have disrupted this perfect balance by building dams