

Justice Camp Meditations

Stephen Martin

The Biblical vision of the land begins with creation, though strictly speaking there is no Hebrew word for “creation.” The word *eretz* can mean the whole earth, a particular plot of ground, or habitation of a people. This ambiguity is important to keep in mind. Two key texts, Genesis 1 and Ps 104 imagine the *eretz* as good, diverse, and fecund (or fruitful). Humans find their place within the *eretz*. We belong to and depend upon the goodness, diversity, and fecundity of the land. But we differ from other creatures in that we have a gift and a task to nurture the goodness, diversity, and fecundity of the land. This nurturing we call culture (which derives from “cultivation”). In culture we also extend goodness, diversity, and fecundity, making paper out of trees, wine out of grapes, and bread out of grain. We shape the air into language, and fashion tools out of fire and metal. Thus culture has tremendous power and possibility, both creative and destructive. For we can forget that we are always in a relation of mutual dependance with the land, and in misusing the land we also damage ourselves.

So we are cultivators. But we are also cultivated. The first gardener is God, and so Bible speaks of Israel as God’s vine (Isaiah 5:1-10, c.f. John 15:1-8), God’s fig tree (Jer 8:13, c.f. Matt 21:19), God’s olive tree (Jer 11:16). John the Baptist called Israel to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Matt 3:8), and Jesus spoke of ethical or unethical actions as the “fruit” pointing to the nature of the tree (Matt 7:17-19). Paul spoke of the activity of the Gospel in the world as “bearing fruit”, and of the virtues characterizing a community in Christ as “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22).¹

The term “virtue” means “excellence” wherein something fulfills its created purpose. We might think of it as a characteristic of a fruitful community. When we talk about virtues we are asking the question: *what kind of people do we need to be in order to be fruitful followers of Jesus?* It should be noted that this is a different question than: what ought we to do as followers of Jesuits? Fruit-bearing discipleship can’t be reduced to a list of “things to do.” The relation of tree to fruit means that being good is prior to doing good.

Put a different way (and in connection to our theme for Justice Camp): what does being good (and cultivating goodness) in the good land *look like?*

When we talk about virtue, we also talk about *habits*. An excellent musician is one who has developed the habits necessary to play well. Through scales and technical studies, by learning from a teacher and imitating the masters, we might say that she becomes habituated to her instrument. Playing becomes “second nature.” Habit and habituation are also deeply related to our topic of land. A habit is a way we are habituated to our world, how we make our world a *habitat*. We make ourselves at home in the world through habits developed in the Christian training regime called “discipleship.” The Christian message is fundamentally a way of seeing

¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

the world similar to and different from other ways of seeing. This will be discussed more in the plenaries.

The most important place where we are habituated to the world as God intends is in worship, or liturgy. The liturgy reimagines the world, our relation to it, and our place in it. This should become evident in what follows. But the gateway to worship, indeed to the Christian community, is baptism. Baptism is a move from death (and its vices) into life (and its virtues). In baptism, we “put off” the old ways, the ways that lead to the barrenness of death, and we “put on” the new ways of Christ. Paul talks about this movement in Rom 5 and Col 3, with the latter spelling out the vices and virtues that differentiate those in Christ. The language of baptism is also the language of immersion, and the immersions of Justice Camp. For each group will be “immersed” in a land-space that will display both the ways of death and the possibilities of new life. It is our hope that these will become, if not fresh baptisms, reminders of the power of baptism and its transition from death to resurrection.

What follows here is the identification of four specific “virtues of the land.” These are virtues which habituate us to the land as God intended, fruits of living well in the land, ways that we know we are becoming the kind of people God has called us to be, and challenges to the barrenness of our modern, industrial land-habits. In their book *Beyond homelessness: Christian faith in a culture of displacement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) Brian Walsh and Steven Bouma Prediger suggest four virtues which habituate us to the world in a manner reflecting the Biblical story: justice, peaceableness, wisdom, and compassion. Walsh and Bouma Prediger speak of these virtues as the means by which we come home to the land.

In what follows, each of these virtues is introduced by imagining it in relation to the theme of land, by scripture, and by a meditation. Special attention is given to the most fundamental act by which we are habituated to the world as God intends it: the act of the church gathering in worship. Worship trains us to see the world as God’s world, created good, diverse, and fecund, as broken through human sin, and as redeemed in Jesus Christ.

The first virtue covered is justice, and this is meant to link to the idea of “Justice Camp.” What do we mean by justice, and how does the biblical vision of justice relate to the idea of “everyone getting their due”? The reflection is more lengthy than the others, and is meant to anticipate the opening Eucharist on Saturday. The next three virtues correspond to each of the three immersion days. For each virtue there are questions to take into the day’s immersion. These questions may be used in conversation, reflection, and prayer.

I have left the actual use of the meditations open-ended. Some may wish to use them as personal devotions to supplement Morning Prayer. Others may use them in the immersion group setting as the day begins. They may also assist reflecting back on the immersion experience at the end of the day. Participants who blog may find them helpful for shaping their postings. Throughout the week I will be collecting responses from the immersion groups, and these will make up the substance of my plenary for Wednesday afternoon.

Justice

1. Getting started

What images come to mind when you think of “land” and “[in]justice” together? Write or draw them below.

2. A vision of [in]justice

Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,
and bring righteousness to the ground!

They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.

Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;
for it is an evil time.

Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.

Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:7–17, 21-24

3. Reflecting on scripture

What surprised or stood out for you in this reading? What image is the most powerful? How did your image or images of [in]justice compare to Amos'? What images might he use today?

4. Thinking about justice

Classically, justice is the impartial rendering to everyone his or her due. There are some problems with this definition from a biblical perspective. First, is it only “ones” (individuals) who have something coming to them? What about communities? Institutions? What about non-human creatures? The land itself? Secondly, what is “due”? This depends in large extent on what story frames the recipients of justice. Is it the story of random, impersonal evolutionary processes? Of an irresolvable competition between humans over space and resources? Of humans striving to overcome the limits of [their] nature? Or is it the story of a benevolent God creating a harmonious world in which every creature from greatest to least has a part in a global hymn of praise? If we follow the latter story, then rendering to humans their due means providing what they need to image this God. Finally, against the idea that justice must be blind to the particulars of people’s lives, and impartial to their social situation, a biblical view of justice is always biased toward the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (e.g. Deut 10:18, cf. James 1:27). The widow, orphan, and the stranger name three kinds of people who are made utterly dependant

on others, and whose plight is worsened by unjust economic systems. They are the vulnerable. As such, they are the special concern of biblical justice.

Scripture gives a number of images of justice. One of the most powerful is Amos' "ever-flowing stream" (5:24). This image conveys the idea of refreshing and replenishing, but also judgment: a sweeping away of those who "turn justice to wormwood" (7), and who live in opulence while "pushing away" the vulnerable (11,12). A more positive image is the king who executes the justice of God by "defending the cause of the poor, giving deliverance to the needy, and crushing the oppressor." (Ps 72:4). While no king in Israel fulfilled this prayer, the line "may all nations be blessed in him" points to Christ, the fulfillment of the promise of blessing to the nations in Abraham (Gen 22:18). Beginning with an announcement of restoring grace to the outsider (Luke 4:16-27), his ministry restored the outcast, the blind, the leper, the possessed. He is the righteous king who brings God's justice, God's reign, God's kingdom. His followers are to be seekers first and foremost of God's justice (Matt 6:33), rather than striving for their own needs and interests.

We learn what it is to be a just people in the liturgy. The focal point is the offering of the gifts. In the early church, the offering was actual food for the Eucharistic meal: bread and wine and other things. People would give what they could, and the offering of the people would be placed on the altar to be blessed, broken, and distributed to the community. This reflects the picture of the Book of Acts: "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). The leftovers would be gathered and given to the needy outside the church. Recalling the table ministry of Jesus, the offering and the Eucharist that followed was a meal of justice, of just distribution. Everyone had what they needed, and like Israel in the wilderness "those who had much did not have too much, and those who had little did not have too little." (Exod 16:18, c.f. 2 Cor 8:15). The Eucharist was a subversive space where the widow, the orphan, and the stranger enjoyed equal status to the wealthy, the powerful. It was not a mere "symbol", but a new beginning of just relations, where the vice of injustice could be unlearned. But the Eucharist could be abused, as Paul points out in 1 Cor 11. William Cavanaugh suggests that not "discerning the body" (11:29) meant "not discerning the body of Christ *in the poor at the table*". Such people were learning that "the Eucharist can kill you."

There is one more dimension of the offering to consider: What we offer is "the fruit of the vine"—which God has given us—but also "the work of human hands." We offer to God the fruit of the land, but also what we have done with that land in our tending and caring for it. Without the land, there is no eucharist. Can we truly offer the fruit of the land if we have not rendered the land *its* due? Is our 'solemn assembly' just a noise to God? Dare we make the further connection between just relations with the land and a Eucharist that brings justice and life, rather than injustice and death?

5. Prayer

God of justice,
you call us in the justice of Christ
from the abuse of forests and flowers,
wetlands and waterways,

the air we breathe,
and the breath of people
to seek justice in the land.

Give us this day
eyes to see our own involvements in injustice
ears to hear the word of Christ to call the land to justice
And feet to walk in the ways of Christ the just one.

Renew our commitment to be agents of justice for the land.

Make your church a people of justice, that the world may see in us hope for a world in which every creature has what it needs to flourish.

For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.

Day Two (Sunday)
Peaceableness

1. Getting started

What images come to mind when you think of “land” and “peaceableness” together? Write or draw them below.

2. A vision of peaceableness

In days to come

 the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
 and shall be raised up above the hills.

Peoples shall stream to it,

 and many nations shall come and say:
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
 to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
 and that we may walk in his paths.’

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
 and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between many peoples,
 and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;

they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
 and their spears into pruning-hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
 neither shall they learn war any more;

but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
 and no one shall make them afraid;

 for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

Micah 4:1-4

3. Reflecting on scripture

What surprised or stood out for you in this reading? What image is the most powerful? How did your image or images of peaceableness compare to Micah's? What images might he use today?

4. Thinking about peaceableness

Walsh and Bouma-Prediger define the virtue of peaceableness as “the settled disposition to pursue non-violently wholeness in relations: with self, with God, with other humans, and with creation.”

The biblical vision of peaceableness is captured in the Hebrew term *shalom*, which speaks of a comprehensive soundness or wholeness. In old English the term “weal”, from which we derive the term “wealth” translates well the idea (hence “commonwealth” = “the common good”). Tellingly our culture has reduced the idea of “wealth” to bank balances. Two images from the Old Testament show the breadth of the idea of *shalom*. Micah 4:3 speaks of a time when God will put an end to war, where dividing and conquering swords will be refashioned into tilling and tending ploughshares and pruning hooks. The land filled with blood shall be a land fruitful again. Ezekiel 34 speaks of this time with the image of safety: dwelling securely in houses, with fear neither of human enemies nor of the natural world. Isaiah speaks of the natural world itself as reconciled, with lion and lamb lying down together.

The New Testament writers knew much of the sword, especially the idea that peace was a fruit of violent conquest, and was maintained by the terror of the sword. The most bald symbol of the Roman “peace” were the crosses punctuating the landscape around vassal cities like Jerusalem. How powerful then Paul’s image of God making bringing wholeness to the created world through the cross of Jesus Christ (Col 1:20). God makes *shalom* not by means of violence but by embracing and absorbing our violence. And so in his first appearance to the disciples, the words of the nail- and sword-scarred Risen Christ, “peace be with you,” take on special meaning.

We learn what it is to be a peaceable people in the liturgy. The focal point is the exchange of the peace, usually following the prayer of confession and absolution, and preceding the Eucharist. We prepare to be healed by God’s reconciling action by speaking (and touching) reconciliation to each other. The exchange of the peace was the moment in the ancient Christian liturgy where members of the community in conflict could “leave their gift at the front of the altar and be reconciled to their brother or sister” (Matt 5:24). For only those at peace can partake of God’s peace, and be blessed as peacemakers (Matt 5:9).

We can see from this how biblical vision and liturgical practice contrast a culture of contention, of assertion of rights and entitlements without concern for the common-weal of the

community. Thus Walsh and Bouma-Prediger suggest that the vice corresponding to peaceableness is contentiousness. Contentiousness disrupts peace. This is not to say that peace equals status quo, if the status quo fails to reflect the soundness biblical vision calls us to. Such status quo is not peace (and in this regard Jesus came to disrupt unjust situations). But contentiousness directs a community away from wholeness to fragmentation, the “biting and devouring” that is the opposition of the command to love one’s neighbour as oneself. (Gal 5:15) In a culture of cynicism, a peaceable people is thus a deeply subversive people, embodying together a vision of fruitfulness alternative to that of our contentious culture.

5. Questions for the day

1. How is the power of death manifest in the disruption of relationships in your immersion-context?
2. What dividing walls (systemic, geographic, economic) are there that separate people in Edmonton from each other? From the land?
3. How is the church called to break down walls, to build bridges, to reconnect people and place?
4. Can you identify (what is) or imagine (something that could be) a tangible symbol of such a bridge in your immersion-context?
5. Linking back to your reflections on the Micah passage, what picture specific to your immersion can you hold forth of a land at peace?
6. How can your local church become a peaceable people?

6. Prayer

God of peace:

you call us

in the peace of Christ,
away from clamour and restlessness
to seek the peace of the land.

Give us this day

eyes to see our own involvements in clamour and contention in the land,
ears to hear the word of Christ to speak peace to the land
and feet to walk in the ways of Christ the peaceable one.

Renew our commitment to be peaceable agents of justice for the land.

Make your church a people of peace, that the world may see in us the one who took on himself the violence of the world to make peace.

For his sake we pray. Amen.

1. Getting started

What images come to mind when you think of “land” and “wisdom” together? Write or draw them below.

2. A vision of wisdom

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

And now, my children, listen to me:
happy are those who keep my ways.
Hear instruction and be wise,

and do not neglect it.
Happy is the one who listens to me,
watching daily at my gates,
waiting beside my doors.
For whoever finds me finds life
and obtains favor from the LORD;
but those who miss me injure themselves;
all who hate me love death.”

Prov 8:22–36

3. Reflecting on scripture

What surprised or stood out for you in this reading? What image is the most powerful? How did your image or images of wisdom compare to the writer’s? What image might (s)he use today?

4. Thinking about wisdom

“The virtue of wisdom,” write Walsh and Bouma-Prediger, “is the inclination to make sound judgments, informed by the biblical story and the accumulated experience of the Christian community and aimed at what is truly good.”

The biblical vision of wisdom is captured in images of God’s design of creation, with wisdom as “a master craftsman” guiding the sound judgments of the creator (Prov 8), and evident in the repeated phrase in Gen 1, “and God saw that it was good.” Creation’s goodness consists in its reflecting the wisdom of God (Ps 104:24). But this creational wisdom is also given to human beings. The tabernacle, which scholars think was intended as a “model” of creation full of God’s glorious presence, was built by Bezalel, who was “filled... with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft.” (Exod 31:3-4) Humans made in God’s image are called to exercise the same gift of wisdom in tending creation as God did in making it. This is why New Testament writers connected God incarnate with wisdom: Jesus Christ, says John is the Word “through whom all things were made” (1:3); he is “the image of the invisible God,” says Paul, “the one before all things [and] in whom all things hold together” (Col 1:15-17).

We learn what it is to be a wise people in the liturgy. Returning to the construction of the tabernacle as reflecting God’s wisdom in creation, for the sake of worship, we could look at the

whole liturgy as reflecting the divine gift of wisdom. The way the liturgy gathers and orders a multitude into a coherent, single body aimed at the good of the whole certainly reflects the work of wisdom. An appropriate focal point within the liturgy is in the proclamation of the Word. It is this Word that interrupts the call of folly that echoes throughout our culture, and invites us to pay heed, to “watch at [her] gates and attend by [her] doors”; it is this Word that also invites us to dine at wisdom’s table (Prov 9:2), thus linking Word to sacrament.

Scripturally the contrasting vice to wisdom is foolishness. Proverbs contrasts the wise woman with the prostitute named “Folly” (Prov 7). This may be offensive to us, even patriarchal. But we have to understand it against the background of the biblical proscription against idolatry, and the understanding that failure to keep covenant (surely the essence of wisdom) is spiritual adultery. Such idolatrous adultery is “the way of death” (Prov 7:27) into which foolishness leads, not only for humans but for the whole creation.

Walsh and Bouma-Prediger suggest two ways this contrast can be seen in contemporary culture. The first is in the contrast between the wisdom of “appreciative use” of creation and the foolishness of mere “technical proficiency” detached from any vision of the good. The second is the modern focus on “the goods life” as opposed to “the good life.” In this way we can see that a genuinely wise people is a subversive people, embodying together a vision alternate to that of our knowledge-obsessed culture.

5. Questions for the day

1. How is the power of death manifest in the vice of foolishness in your immersion-context?
2. Where in your context is wisdom taken for foolishness, and foolishness for wisdom?
3. How is the church called to be a “town-crier” for wisdom?
4. What examples of the wise use of resources can you identify? How might those examples suggest applications to other places?
5. How does the church garnish itself (or fail to garnish itself) with wisdom?
6. What in your immersion-context is a tangible symbol of wisdom?
7. Linking back to your reflections on the Proverbs passage, what picture specific to your immersion can you hold forth of a wise land?
8. How can your local church become a wise people?

6. Prayer

God of wisdom,
you call us
in the wisdom of Christ
from the siren songs of discontent and disorder
to seek the integrity of the land

Give us this day

eyes to see our own involvements in foolish judgements made without regard for the future
of the land

ears to hear the word of Christ to call the land to judge with justice

And feet to walk in the ways of Christ the wise one.

Renew our commitment to be wise agents of justice for the land.

Make your church a people of wisdom, that the world may see in us the one whose wisdom is
scandalous foolishness.

For his sake we pray. Amen.

1. Getting started

What images come to mind when you think of “land” and “compassion” together? Write or draw them below.

2. A vision of compassion

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”

Matt 9:35–38

3. Reflecting on scripture

What surprised or stood out for you in this reading? What image is the most powerful? How did your image or images of compassion compare to Jesus’? What image might he use today?

4. Thinking about compassion

Compassion is often confused with pity, feeling sorry for someone. It is much more than this. Walsh and Bouma-Prediger define compassion as “the habitual disposition to suffer with another.” Suffering-with captures well the biblical image of compassion. The root of the Hebrew word translated “compassion” means “womb.” The idea of God’s compassion conveys the image of God’s womb. Compassion is thus connected to a suffering-with that is generative, rather than

passive. Exod 34:6 makes compassion part of God's character revealed to Moses. When Ps 78 speaks of God's forgiving compassion, it means that God suffered-with his people in refusing to destroy them, and in allowing for another way.

The New Testament word translated "compassion" conveys the image of feeling deep down in the gut, as Jesus did when he saw the people as "sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36). But this was not mere pity, for right after Jesus calls his disciples to prayer. At other times Jesus' compassion for the crowd moved him to heal (14:14), feed (15:32), and teach (Mark 6:34). It was with the compassion of Jesus that Paul longed for the Philippians (1:8), and urged them to feel the same for each other (2:1). While not directly invoking the word compassion, the womb of creation appears in Rom 8:22, as creation groans in labour pains for the generation of God's future. Not only creation, but Christians experience labour pains as the divine Spirit groans within them in their prayers.

We learn what it is to be a compassionate people in the liturgy. The focal point is the practice of intercessory prayer, "the prayers of the people." Prayer is not (as often people think) a shopping list of needs and wants, but an entering into the suffering of the world, a participation in God's groanings, a passion shared with the world for God's future to emerge. Prayer teaches us to wait with pregnant-but-patient expectation.

Walsh and Bouma-Prediger suggest that the vice corresponding to compassion is apathy, indifference to suffering. There are forms of indifference, including the indifference to the suffering of hungry and homeless people, here and abroad, and the indifference to the suffering of the land itself. Modern culture (and bad theology) does everything it can to hide or disguise suffering. We like our suburbs far from the slums and projects of the inner city. We don't know—and we don't want to know—where our food comes from, nor can we see first hand the conditions under which it is produced. Another form of indifference is the bureaucratic mindset that sees suffering as a problem to be solved, through the dispassionate application of technological solutions. Entering into the suffering of the land and its people is therefore a countercultural act. A compassionate people is thus a subversive people, embodying together a vision alternative both to solipsistic indifference and superficial solutions.

5. Questions for the day

1. How is the power of death manifest in the vice of indifference in your immersion-context?
2. Where is compassion present in your immersion-context? Where is it absent?
3. What might be examples of a compassionate policies and practices? How might these suggest applications in other places?
4. How does the church see (or fail to see) with compassion?
5. Can you identify or imagine a tangible symbol of compassion in your immersion-context?
6. Linking back to your reflections on the Matthew passage, what picture specific to your immersion can you hold forth of a compassionate land?

7. How can your local church become a compassionate people?

6. God of compassion:

you call us
in the compassion of Christ,
away from indifference and apathy
to seek compassion in the land.

Give us this day
eyes to see our wilful and unwitting indifference to the brokenness of the land
ears to hear the word of Christ to take on the pain of the land
feet to walk in the steps of Christ the compassionate one.

Renew our commitment to be compassionate agents of justice for the land.

Make your church a people of compassion,
that the world may see in us the One whose guts were moved by the sight of brokenness.

For his sake we pray. Amen.

1. Getting started

What images from the past week come to mind when you think together

- Land, justice, and peaceableness?
- Land, justice, and wisdom?
- Land, justice, and compassion?

2. A vision of the land

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

Deut 8:7-10

3. Thinking about the land, the boundary, and second chances

The book of Deuteronomy is so named because it is a reiteration of the torah, or law (*deuteros + nomos*), and is traditionally associated with the copy of the law Israel's king was to have made, and on which he was to meditate (Deut 17:18-19). We can understand "reiteration" in two additional ways. The first is to look at the canonical context of the book, its place in the Bible. Israel stands on the boundary between the wilderness and the land of promise, between promise and fulfillment, between death and life. The book consists of a series of sermons given by Moses to remind the people of what has gone before, and what lies ahead (depending on their obedience). The second is to look at what most scholars believe to be the historical origin of the book, as the impetus for Josiah's reforms in the seventh century BCE. There is evidence that a version of the book is referred to in 2 Kings 22 as "the book of the law" discovered by Hilkiah in the temple. This reiteration comes as Judah is descending rapidly into idolatry and judgment, and Josiah's response is the occasion for repentance and renewal. We also stand at the boundary between creation and destruction, judgment and deliverance, death and life. One way of naming that boundary is in terms of virtues and vices, and by wondering what kind of people we will be in the land. Will we be just, or unjust? Peaceable, or contentious? Wise, or foolish?

Compassionate, or indifferent? And what concrete, communal form will justice, peaceableness, wisdom, and compassion take as the church struggles to find itself faithful?

4. Reflecting on scripture (1)

Thinking on your immersion experiences this week as a kind of boundary, how would you rewrite this passage to reflect them? What would your context look like if it “bless[ed] the Lord” for the good land?

5. Reflecting on scripture (2)

Thinking of your parish context as a kind of boundary, how would you rewrite this passage to reflect it? What would *that* context look like if it “bless[ed] the Lord” for the good land?

6. Prayer

God of land, of this land and all lands
of streams and rivers,
of hills and valleys,
of grain and grapes,
of copper and iron:

We confess that we have disconnected ourselves from the land,
and in so doing we have disconnected ourselves from you.
We have done our best to eliminate trust from our lives,
and we now see the price the land pays.

Give us eyes to see our complicity
and ears to hear the groaning of the land.

But give us also hands to plant and lips to taste and arms to embrace the good of your land,
that we may experience in its brokenness the promise of its renewal.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.