

A WORD FOR THE WEARY

ISAIAH 50:4-9A

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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For many people, particularly those whose lives run according to the school calendar, last week was the first full week of regular fall routines.

And, of course, this is our church's first Sunday where we return to our fall schedule.

This is a day when we focus on *Christian formation*—this wonderful phrase that is at the heart (or *ought* to be at the heart) of all that we say and do in the life of the church.

This is what church is all about: to be formed as human beings after the pattern of Christ, and to help one another along the way.

It is, or *ought to be*, a joyful and exhilarating task.

So, I sat down this week with the texts and the theme for Mennonite Church Canada's Christian Formation Sunday resources.

Isaiah 50. *Sustain the Weary with a Word.*

That didn't sound very joyful or exhilarating. It didn't sound like a very optimistic or rousing way to start a new year.

I read the text and my suspicions were confirmed.

Isaiah 50 is one of what are known as the "Servant Songs. These are four texts from the prophet Isaiah that collectively describe a mysterious figure called "The Servant of the Lord" who will bring justice to the nations, and open blinded eyes, who will be a light to

the Gentiles, who will be despised and rejected, who will be crushed and led like a lamb to slaughter.

Isaiah 50 is the third of these Servant Songs, and it describes the servant of the Lord being mocked and abused by his accusers, and choosing not to retaliate, trusting that it is the Lord who will vindicate his cause.

It's an important text that has much to teach us.

Christians have, of course, long seen these texts as finding fulfillment in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. They are hugely significant passages of Isaiah that point us to the unique ways in which God's redemption is accomplished through suffering, nonviolent love.

But for Christian Formation Sunday? It didn't seem like the greatest fit.

So, I kept thinking about the one phrase: *To know the word that sustains the weary...*

And I began to think about the things that weary us as human beings, as Christians.

In the context of Isaiah, the source of weariness is quite obvious. The people of Israel are in exile at the hands of the Babylonians.

Exile is wearying.

It is wearying to be in a strange land under foreign rule. It is wearying to be receiving judgment for sin.

It is wearying to wander from God and his purposes.

It is wearying to long for home and to not know if or when you might return.

The weariness into which Isaiah speaks these words is a very deep one, borne of the profound existential crisis of his people.

Our stories are perhaps not quite as dramatic as the audience of Isaiah's Servant Songs. But what about us? As we head into fall, are we weary?

I did a quick survey of my own condition, and I discovered that—lo and behold—I kind of am!

There is the general tiredness that always comes this time of year, as our family's calendar begins to fill up with innumerable activities, as we bid a wistful farewell to the less-structured days of summer.

By the second week of September our calendar looks something like a rainbow of congestion (we have the kids and our own schedules arranged according to colour).

And, of course, fall means the church calendar begins to fill up, as well. More meetings and begin to show up on my calendar, there more reports to write, more activities to attend. It's all good and important stuff, but it's just, well, *more*.

And then there is the weariness that has come with the recent swell of interest in our local Syrian refugee project, and all that this has entailed, whether media demands or all the phone calls, emails, meetings, etc. about how to help, what to do.

It's been wonderful to see the outpouring of community support, but it's been time-consuming. And it's not always easy to know how to direct people, what to say about how best to help—especially when there are so few refugees actually available for sponsorship, given how slowly their claims are being processed by the government.

More generally, it can be wearisome to read the news many days. So much of what we think and how we think about it is conditioned by the media we consume, and there is probably a lesson to be learned about choosing how we will allow media to shape our perspectives.

But sometimes, the weight of human suffering is just exhausting, whether we're talking about Syrian refugees or the less headline-worthy tragedies of people's daily struggles.

So, yes, I do feel weary as fall approaches.

Maybe you do, too.

Perhaps you, too, look at the news of the day and feel tempted to despair.

Maybe you, too, are feeling a bit overwhelmed as fall approaches and wondering how you're going to juggle all of the demands on your time.

Or, perhaps there are more specific things that weary you.

Perhaps you have recently lost someone dear to you. Perhaps a relationship is in rough shape.

Perhaps the money is going out faster than it's coming in. Perhaps you're concerned about a kid and the choices they're making. Perhaps your job is demanding things of you that you don't feel able to give.

Perhaps you've been struggling with questions of doubt and faith and you wish you could just figure out what you believed!

Perhaps your body is breaking down and you're frustrated and anxious about what the future might hold.

There is no shortage of things to weary us in this world.

And so whatever it is that wearies us, what do we need to sustain us?

Well, the prophet Isaiah talks about a "word."

This seems somewhat counterintuitive. Words are pretty cheap and easy, aren't they?

Just this morning, I came across a quote on Facebook that was being shared enthusiastically:

Before you speak to me about your religion, first show it to me in how you treat other people; before you tell me how much you love your God, show me how much you love all his children; before you preach to me of your passion for your faith, teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors. In the end, I'm not as interested in what you have to tell or sell as I am in how you choose to live and give. — Cory Booker (US Senator, NJ)

Who among us could disagree with this? The quote expresses a deep and profound

truth about how vitally important the connection between word and deed is!

And, thousands of years after Isaiah, we are quite literally drowning in words.

We are assaulted by words from the moment we get up until our heads hit the pillow at night.

Our televisions and radios and computers and mobile devices rarely give us a moment's peace, filling our brains with words.

Words trying to sell us things or to buy our votes. Words to get our attention, words to impress and outdo, words to tear each other down.

Words demanding responses, words swimming around the borders of our increasingly fragile attention spans.

Words doing nothing more than filling time and space. Words to convince us of what we should love, what we should click on, what we should support, what we should share, where we should go and what we should do.

Words about God—so *many* words about God, about what God wants and who God likes and why God isn't doing *x* or *y* and about what God would do if we would only just...

I love words. I really do.

But some days, words can seem pretty unreliable.

They can be slippery things, so easily twisted and massaged and manipulated. Words both reveal and conceal.

They clutter things up, they can get lost in the chatter and the noise, they drift away unnoticed in a never-ending current of commentary.

Words aren't concrete like a seed or a sprocket or a sandwich. You can't pick them up and examine their texture. Sometimes they come too easily to be worth much.

Occasionally, people will very kindly tell me that I am "good with words." Which is

nice. But sometimes I wonder what good words are. The world needs more seeds and sprockets and sandwiches.

Or silence, come to think of it.

But not words. Those are a dime a dozen.

And yet.

The prophet Isaiah says, *The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary...*

God thinks words are valuable, evidently.

Words were there in the beginning when this beautiful world was spoken into existence. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, speaking life and grace and truth to starved and straying hearts and minds.

Words were one of the ways in which Jesus inaugurated his kingdom while on earth—words of liberation, peace, judgment, and hope.

All kinds of strange and beautiful and inexplicably comprehensible words were there with tongues of fire when the church was born at Pentecost.

Each of encounters the gospel of peace and life through words. Not *just* words, of course. But words are part of the story.

We *need* good words. We need them very much.

And so, on this first real Sunday of fall, perhaps we could use this reminder. We need words to sustain one another, whether we are kids or adults. We need well-chosen words.

We need words to sustain us in the life of faith—words to encourage and uplift...

I have a file on my computer called the “Feeling miserable” file. ☺

It is full of messages received over the years—emails, text messages, notes about phone calls, etc.—from people who said encouraging things to me, to say that they appreciated this or that thin that I said or wrote or did.

These notes give me hope. They encourage me to press on. They remind me that I'm not incompetent! 😊

We all need words like this, I think.

And we need to be *bearers* of these kinds of words to one another. Sometimes it can be the smallest thing—a “thank you,” an “I really appreciated that song you played,” a “thanks for bringing that snack.”

It can be almost anything that says, “I see you. I appreciate you. Keep going!”

We also need words to instruct and inform. We think particularly of these words as we head back into the rhythms of Sunday School at church.

We need to give our kids (and our adults!) good tools for understanding God, themselves, and the world—particularly in a cultural context where there is a good deal of sloppy, incoherent thinking, where the general default seems to be that religion and spirituality are kind of things that you can just tailor to suit your own preferences.

We need to hear the stories of Jesus.

We need words like the ones from Isaiah 50 that show us what it looks like to refuse retaliation in the face of mistreatment and injustice, and to truly *trust* that God is the one who will vindicate us.

We need to be familiar with the broad story of Scripture, of how God has been at work throughout history, so that we will get to *know* God, so that we will develop the eyes and ears to see and hear God in our contexts.

We need words to embolden and defend. We need to know that we are not alone on this journey of faith. We need to encounter the stories of one another, to hear that our questions and doubts and fears are not unique to us.

We need words offered humbly. Because our words will inevitably fall short. None of

us understands perfectly or completely. None of our words will do the job on their own. Our words can be as good as we can possibly make them (and they should be!), but ultimately it is the Spirit of God's job to convict and correct and lead people into truth.

But part of how we are formed according to the pattern of Christ is through good words.

And our task—as educators and as fellow pilgrims—is to sustain one another along the journey.

So. Maybe the theme was an appropriate one after all. Regardless of whether we are weary or not. And whatever the causes of our weariness might be.

We need words to sustain one another on the journey.

May God equip us to be bearers of good words to one another in the year ahead.

May God help our words to be the fruit of love, hope, grace, and compassion, as we seek to build one another up, to be the presence of Christ in a hurting world.

Amen.

