

St. Augustine of Hippo, from the Africa province of the Roman empire wrote in the 4th century, “Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, They set before your eyes the things that They had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?”

First hymn is Green #107 “When Jesus Walked Upon the Earth”

Our first reading is from the book of Isaiah, chapter 58: “Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

² For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.

³ ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,
‘and you have not seen it?’

Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?’

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.

⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness^[a] will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.
"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.
11 The Lord will guide you always;
God will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.
12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Our second reading is from the recent encyclical of Pope Leo: “Magnifica Humanitas,” or “Magnificent Humanity,” “The search for truth is an essential element of democracy ... When questions about what is true lose their appeal, and a pragmatism takes hold that is content with what appears useful or effective, then democratic life is weakened ... Indifference to the truth leads, slowly but surely, to a descent into totalitarianism. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote, the ideal subjects of such regimes are not so much those who are ideologically convinced, but rather ‘people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (ie, the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (ie, the standards of thought) no longer exist’.” “For this reason, humanity — in all its grandeur and woundedness — must never be replaced or surpassed. There can be a paradox of material progress and anthropological regression that undermines the foundations of a just and stable social peace. We can embrace the technological progress that alleviates suffering and unlocks new possibilities, provided that we do not abandon the very essence of our humanity, namely the capacity for relationship and love.”

Our final reading is from Gus Speth, former dean of the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies at Yale, who has been widely attributed to say: “I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy. To deal with those issues we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists do not know how to do that.”

Let us share our Concerns and Joys carried in our hearts this morning, voicing them into this community of loving Friends-- Let us hold these expressions from Friends together with those joys and concerns left unsaid in our hearts, and for the many near and far, in Light and love. (Musical Interlude)

Dear Friends—In these crisis-touched times show us the way to spiritual and cultural transformation. Let us walk on the earth with intention that our fasting, our personal restraint and morality may be not for show, but for justice, a way towards being more human and present to one another. Help us to live the text of our times and places, of our earth and of our souls. to read the sacred book of the creation all around us. Teach us that there is no search for meaning, but a living out of Spirit and Truth that is discerned and Light-infused, that we can do no other, that the way is defined and the meaning one. Let us be the steady and constant response to the needs of all. Amen.

Message hymn is Green #187 “A Garden of My Own”

Message: Dear Friends—There are many who refer to our times as a time of poly-crisis because so many different issues are seen as having reached the level of crisis, whether it’s climate, inequality, war, immigration, democracy, technology, human rights. While all need to be addressed, one does not need to become an expert in all of these issues to address the crises, one must become attuned more deeply to values, to a personal bottom line that will address all situations. In fact, the constant hype that informs us about the crises in our pockets is establishing and spreading a mental health crisis of intentional compulsion and anxiety that works to separate us from our values. In trying to balance and delineate between attention and distraction, one possible line might be between events and life, between the plethora of individual facts and mountains of data and Truth in the large sense.

In his message on the magnificence of humanity, the Pope grounds the discussion in the human capacity for love and relationship and the need to stay close to the reality of experience. There are so many things that we can know about in this information age, but we remain in the same basic timespan of waking experience and

process of maturation and insights as those who lived in every other age. The varieties of experience we can have may also have grown, but the richness of understanding and the emotional depth of perception backed by wisdom remain recognized values from ancient Egypt, to Rome, and the great thinkers of Asia, and indigenous shamans around the world. The thread of artistic expression touches all in its human generation, and as Augustine noted, the thread of the natural world coming from Gaia provides all we need to read and learn, and always has. It is amazing that these miracles, these things of transcendence are also those of basic grounding. Calm yourself with wonder!

When it comes to spiritual seeking--another common path for so many humans--there are also many pursuits, so many readings that are possible for us to choose each First Day as we inform and pursue our messages. But, in many ways they all lead to messages similar to that of the ancient prophet, where Isaiah points out that it is not the careful ritual pursuit of all the right actions that gets to blessing. It is the recognition and true empathetic fulfillment of connection and providing for the needs of those around us that will feed and grow the spirit. Only love will bear us safely home. Are you feeding the hungry, are you comforting the afflicted, are you welcoming the stranger? The same questions Jesus asked with such profound effect. He also lived at a time when individuals were crowning themselves as emperors and declaring themselves gods, seeking to corner the market on greatness. We are watching with incredulity people who think of themselves and even call themselves "masters of universe" vacuum up what they think is all human knowledge and data, dreaming of living on new planets and worlds, but with no happiness and no meaning for themselves or others. An eternal life without purpose. Ongoing youth and glory without ever addressing the questions of why. The horror and shame of a trillionaire, the terribly misguided pursuit of having the strongest military, the hubris of claiming to own or be exclusively

entitled to land or nation, monuments to shame Ozymandias. What great folly. What great wrongs.

Science and information have great value, data has brought us many valuable insights. But, as Gus Speth wrote, what science has to say to us with all its insights cannot move culture and the spirit, and are often bound by it. Many of us struggle with making what we think are logical arguments only to run into emotional or culturally driven responses that make the logic impossible for convincing or even to be understood. It also goes the other way when we have our favorite driving route that might actually be longer than another way, or a favorite food that we know is bad for us. I remember when my mother's doctor told her that with her high cholesterol, she should stop eating butter. Her response was, "But I'm from Wisconsin!". She did not give up butter. Part of that example is that she could not feel the tangible difference enough to alter her morning's pleasant routine.

We can, however, feel the differences of love and compassion along with the dangers of hubris, the themes of all of our great human dramatic, spiritual, and epic works. It is what we look for in the stories of history and the words of songs. The rituals and scriptures of religion are designed to bring those messages home. Humans have been reading the earth and ourselves and sharing the message all along. We need new ways to know and embrace it, to have truth speak to power. The great sins and ignorance of our times, the shameful will to power cannot stand in the Light.

Closing hymn is Green #243 "Love Will Guide Us"

St. Augustine also wrote, "What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like." "God provides the wind, Humans must raise the sail. "