

“A Harrowing Advent”

Responsive Reading, “Harrowing in Hope” ¹

The four years that we lived in Texas were quite an adventure. During those four years, Texas had one of the worst droughts ever, one of the worst tornados ever, one of the worst ice storms ever, and some other awful thing I don't remember. I expect Texas was glad to be rid of us!

Texas is a big place with many different kinds of topography, and we enjoyed traveling to various parts of the state to experience some of that. One of the areas we visited most often included state parks and campgrounds in the vicinity of Cleburne, south of Fort Worth, and I think it was on one of those camping trips that we stumbled onto a most amazing sight.

We didn't know that north central Texas is a major part of the “migration funnel” through which Monarch butterflies travel north and south twice a year, and we were walking in the woods on a path alongside a river when we came upon a secluded beach that was completely covered by thousands and thousands of Monarch butterflies. It was amazing.

Monarch butterflies are one of God's most delicate and durable creatures. Every October they begin their journey south from the U.S. and Canada, arriving in Mexico around the beginning of November, sometimes after flying 3,000 miles and up to 265 miles per day.

Monarchs use the earth's magnetic field to guide their travels, but how the migration route stays in their collective memory remains a scientific mystery. These creatures are beautiful, and they also serve a most useful purpose. Like bees, butterflies pollinate a variety of plants for entire ecosystems. One scientist warned, “If we pull the monarchs out of the system, we're really pulling the rug out from under a lot of other species.”

Sadly, for the past 15 years scientists have been watching the monarch population plummet such that the long-term survival of the species may be in doubt. The causes for the monarchs' decline are complex, but human lifestyle choices appear to be the cause of most of the decline.

Illegal logging in Mexico has reduced the monarchs' winter habitat to a vanishingly small area. “Ecotourists” spend thousands of dollars to gape at the monarchs in Mexico, but in the process they disturb and hurt the creatures they've come to appreciate. And farmers across America have used the herbicide glyphosate (*Round Up*) to decimate milkweed plants, the monarchs' essential food source.

An article in *The New York Times* pondered this situation and identified what it called “the dilemma of human behavior,” noting that “We live in a world of unintended consequences of our own making, which can [seldom] be easily undone.”²

A friend of mine used to like to talk about “**the revenge of unintended consequences,**” and we've certainly seen evidence of that as fire after fire sweeps across California, among many other examples that could be mentioned. I suspect that something of this sort was what Jeremiah was speaking of in the first part of this morning's responsive reading:

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 25, 2018.

² Verlyn Kinkenborg, “Monarchs Fight for Their Lives,” *The New York Times* (10-13-13); Richard Fausset, “Mexico monarch butterfly population smallest in years, study says,” *Los Angeles Times* (3-13-13).

*For this is what the LORD says to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: Break up the unplowed ground; do not sow among the thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, men of Judah and residents of Jerusalem. Otherwise, **my wrath will break out like fire** and burn with no one to extinguish it because of your evil deeds (Jeremiah 4:3-4).*

It seems to me that much of the time, God's "wrath" has a lot to do with unintended consequences.

I'm sure you've heard of "invasive species," and I imagine that you've heard of kudzu. Kudzu is a Japanese vine introduced to the U.S. in 1876 to prevent erosion, and it has been taking over the South at a rate of 150,000 acres every year ever since.

You may also have heard of the Asian carp, originally imported to control the spread of algae in Arkansas fish farms, but some of the fish escaped to the Mississippi River and are now threatening the fishing industry in the Great Lakes. And Jill and I have become sadly aware of something called "The Tree of Heaven" (we have another name for it), first brought to the U.S. as an ornamental in 1784, but now it can be seen literally *everywhere*, once you know what to look for. We have one in our backyard in Virginia, apparently imported via mulch, that I've been trying to kill for years.

Sin in our lives works a lot like an "invasive species" and it brings with it truckloads of "unintended consequences." We choose to engage in some "small" thing that seems relatively harmless, but little by little that small thing grows, invading larger portions of our lives and spirits, and bringing with it lasting and painful consequences that we never, ever intended.

Although we're heading into Advent, here's a delightful Lenten story that describes the kind of thing that generally follows unintended consequences. As Lent approached one year, a pastor was trying to explain the meaning of the season to his three daughters, aged 6, 8, and 11. Here's how he described what happened:

"Lent is a time to do what the Bible calls 'repent,'" I said. "This means that we walk toward God, not away from Him. We say that we are sorry for the things we do that are not right. Lent is also a time when many Christians think about how they are living as they get ready to celebrate what Jesus did on the cross and through his resurrection.

"So far, so good. The girls' eyes were locked on me and hadn't glazed over yet. 'So, some people like to show they are thinking about what Jesus gave up for us by giving up something they think has become too important to them, like their computers or coffee or dessert or meat or television. It doesn't make God love us more; it just makes us more open to God and less cluttered with our own junk.' The girls were still with me.

"We would like to do the same thing as a family. We want to show God that we are thinking of Him in a special way. Your mom and I are going to give up all desserts until Easter. We want you girls to think of what you could give up, something that means a lot to you.'

"Our oldest daughter followed our lead. She said, 'I will give up sweets.'

"Me, too,' our middle daughter chimed in.

"Our youngest daughter pondered the question a little longer as her six-year-old mind worked the angles. I figured she was letting my deep teaching sink in, that she was pondering what really meant a lot to her. She finally nodded with satisfaction at her thoughtful conclusion and said confidently, **'I want to give up consequences!'**³

³ Deron Smith, Springfield, Missouri.

Can I get an “Amen” on that?

Examples of sin’s unintended consequences in our lives could be multiplied without number, as I’m fairly sure you have discovered for yourself. And this gets at the kind of thing that Jeremiah was talking about when he said to “*break up the unplowed ground*” and “*circumcise yourselves to the Lord.*”

So what *were* Jeremiah and Hosea talking about with this “*break up your unplowed ground*” thing? I’ve lived nearly all of my life in medium to large cities, but for five years I was a “country parson” in a town of less than 2,000 people. Most everyone in that small town in the Kentucky Bluegrass had some connection with farming, and I learned there about many things that don’t happen in cities.

“Harrowing” was one of those things. In the city, we use “harrowing” to talk about movies or experiences that are terribly frightening; but in the country, “harrowing” has to do with preparing a field for planting.

Plowing a field involves turning the soil deeply, but harrowing is closer to the surface. Harrowing is done to break up the clods of earth and to smooth the ground in preparation for planting the seed.

Harrowing is not done over and over, but once per season, after which the seed is planted. That’s what Isaiah was talking about when he wrote, *Does the plowman plow every day to plant seed? Does he continuously break up and cultivate the soil? When he has leveled its surface, does he not then scatter [seed]?* (Isaiah 28:24-25).

And this gets at what I mean by the title of this sermon: *A Harrowing Advent*. As the seasons change and we prepare our hearts for the beginning of the Christian calendar next Sunday, what needs to be pulled up, broken up, and leveled out so that our hearts are ready to receive our Lord afresh and more deeply?

My Dad, who spent his whole life in agriculture, and who first learned to plow a field behind a mule, often told me that the way to plow a straight furrow is not to look at where you’ve been, but to look at where you’re going. “Choose a fence post at the other side of the field, and make a bee line for that,” he said.

Plowing our hearts is a lot like that. We’re tempted to look backward over the years, either in pride or in guilt and regret, and pondering that baggage causes the furrow we’re plowing today to be “all over the place”—anywhere but toward God’s goal for our lives. That’s part of what Jesus was getting at when He told us that “*No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God*” (Luke 9:62).⁴

To continue this plowing and harrowing idea, Paul wrote that “*He who plows ought to plow in hope, and he who threshes should thresh in hope of sharing the crop.*” “*This hope will not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*”⁵

The idea here is that we separate ourselves from Sin’s invasions in Hope and anticipation of what God has prepared for us instead.⁶ Jesus told us, “*Don’t be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights to give you the kingdom*” (Luke 12:32).

⁴ He was also talking about “counting the cost” before we follow Him.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:10; Romans 5:5.

⁶ See 1 Corinthians 2:9; Hebrews 11:16.

Over and over again, Jesus urged us to plant and to invest our real treasure in the Kingdom of God. That's an investment that always goes "up," and that stock bubbles, "adjustments," and crashes can never affect. "*Sell your possessions and give to the poor,*" Jesus told us. "*Make money-bags for yourselves that won't grow old, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also***" (Luke 12:33-34).

My friends, Christmas gifts, birthday gifts, and other gifts are certainly nice; but as wonderful as this life is, there is nothing in this life that can be compared to the Gift our Father has prepared for us. We plow, harrow, plant and harvest in the Hope of eventually taking up residence in this eternal, heavenly City; and any sacrifices we make along the way are *not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us!*⁷

You'll remember that the only things that cross over from this realm into that City are our own character and other people we have led to the Lord. And every choice we make, all day long, every day, is shaping that character and determining what crosses over with us. Richard Halverson, Chaplain of the U.S. Senate from 1981-1994, liked to tell a story that makes this point. He was talking to the Senate, which then was nearly all men:

"You're going to meet an old man [or woman] someday down the road—ten, thirty, fifty years from now—waiting there for you. You'll be catching up with him [or her]. What kind of old man are you going to meet? He may be a seasoned, soft, gracious fellow—a gentleman who has grown old gracefully, surrounded by hosts of friends, friends who call him blessed because of what his life has meant to them. Or he may be a bitter, disillusioned, dried-up old buzzard without a good word for anyone—sour, friendless, and alone.

"That old man [or woman] will be you. He'll be the composite of everything you do, say, and think—today and tomorrow. His mind will be in a mold you have made yourself by your beliefs. His heart will be turning out what you've been putting into it all along. Every little thought, every deed goes into creating this old man.

"*Every day in every way you are becoming more and more like yourself.* [This is somewhat shocking,] but true. You're beginning to look more like yourself, think more like yourself, and talk more like yourself. You're becoming yourself more and more.

"Live only in terms of what you're getting out of life and that old man gets smaller, drier, harder, crabbier, and more self-centered. Open your life to others, think in terms of what you can give, what contribution you can make to life, and that old man grows larger, softer, kindlier, and greater." Which person do you want to meet down the road?⁸

My friends, the season of Advent is a season for reflection, for Joy, for Hope. It's really not about Black Friday, or the economy, or decorations, or gifts. Advent is a time to prepare our hearts for God's Spirit to penetrate more deeply into the core of our very being. Advent is a time to travel to Bethlehem in our hearts and to kneel before our King with more purpose and more commitment than ever before.

Perhaps Hosea said it best: "*Sow righteousness for yourselves and reap faithful love; break up your unplowed ground. It is time to seek the LORD until he comes and sends righteousness on you like the rain*" (Hosea 10:12). What does that look like for you, this year?

⁷ Matthew 13:44-46; Romans 8:18

⁸ Daniel Henderson, *The Deeper Life* (Bethany House Publishers, 2014), pp. 165-166.

Psalm of a Gardener

Lord of the compost heap
you take garbage
and turn it into
soil good soil
for seeds to root
and grow
with wildest increase
flowers to bloom
with brilliant beauty.

Take all the garbage
of my life

Lord of the compost heap
turn it into
soil good soil
and then plant seeds
to bring forth
fruit and beauty
in profusion.

Joseph Bayly in "Psalms of My Life,"
Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 1.



Harrowing in Hope

Leader: *For this is what the LORD says to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: Break up the unplowed ground; do not sow among the thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, men of Judah and residents of Jerusalem. Otherwise, my wrath will break out like fire and burn with no one to extinguish it because of your evil deeds (Jeremiah 4:3-4).*

People: ***Sow righteousness for yourselves and reap faithful love; break up your unplowed ground. It is time to seek the LORD until he comes and sends righteousness on you like the rain (Hosea 10:12).***

Leader: *Does the plowman plow every day to plant seed? Does he continuously break up and cultivate the soil? When he has leveled its surface, does he not then scatter black cumin and sow cumin? (Isaiah 28:24-25).*

People: ***No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9:62).***

Leader: *He who plows ought to plow in hope, and he who threshes should thresh in hope of sharing the crop (1 Corinthians 9:10).*

People: ***This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:5).***

Leader: *Don't be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32).*

People: ***Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Make money-bags for yourselves that won't grow old, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Luke 12:33-34).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

People: **Thanks be to God!**

