

“Ill Fares the Land” and the “Arc of the Moral Universe”

Sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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If it's true, (and I believe it), as written in *Ecclesiastes*, that “for everything there is a season,” it's true as well for many of the sermons we've shared together here. In a sermon, there is “a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance...” Before we arrive at the dance, I need and want to share with you some thoughts and feelings that I have been carrying around with me for some time; call it an unburdening as I look back across this year and as we set out for summer and beyond.

To begin, I'll be reading excerpts from Oliver Goldsmith's 1770 poem *The Deserted Village*. You can follow along as I read; it's printed in the order of service.

from *The Deserted Village* by Oliver Goldsmith (1770)

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay...
[T]imes are altered; trade's unfeeling train
Usurp the land and dispossess the swain;
Along the lawn, where scattered hamlet's rose,
Unwieldy wealth and cumbrous pomp repose,
And every want to opulence allied...
Ye friends to truth, ye statesmen, who survey
The rich man's joys increase, the poor's decay,
'Tis yours to judge how wide the limits stand
Between a splendid and a happy land.
Proud swells the tide with loads of freighted ore,
And shouting Folly hails them from her shore;

Hoards even beyond the miser's wish abound,
And rich men flock from all the world around.
Yet count our gains. This wealth is but a name...
Not so the loss. The man of wealth and pride
Takes up a space that many poor supplied;
Space for his lake, his park's extended bounds,
Space for his horses, equipage, and hounds...
Around the world each needful product flies,
For all the luxuries the world supplies:
While thus the land adorned for pleasure, all
In barren splendour feebly waits the fall....
Thus fares the land, by luxury betrayed...
Still let thy voice, prevailing over time,
Redress the rigours of th' inclement clime;
Aid slighted truth; with thy persuasive strain
Teach erring man to spurn the rage of gain;
Teach him that states of native strength possessed,
Though very poor, may still be very blessed;
That trade's proud empire hastes to swift decay...

Though written nearly 250 years ago, Goldsmith's lament about the disappearance and privatization of housing and of our rural and urban commons, the increase in poverty and inequality, the distortion of the economy and the degradation of the landscape by our "rage for gain," trade and luxury, of "hoards even beyond the miser's wish" could have taken from today's headlines, editorials, visual media, advertizing, and think-tank studies.

"Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today," wrote the historian Tony Judt. "For thirty years we have made a virtue out of the pursuit of self-interest... We know what things cost but have no idea what they are worth. We [are failing] to ask of a judicial ruling or a

legislative act: Is it good? Is it fair? Is it just? Is it right? Will it help bring about a better society or a better world?" (Tony Judt, "Ill Fares the Land," *NY Review of Books*, April 29, 2010) I

Dispirited young people facing daunting employment and housing prospects, facing our disregard for the environment and global warming—young people, who should be full of hope, instead are confronted with injustices of class and caste, economic disparities and exploitation at home and abroad, the corruption and money and privilege that is deeply distorting our democracies—young people faced with politically orchestrated insatiability, and markets that inflame, through every sense and pore, the hunger for consumption—there's a sense of drift, frustration and lack of purpose among them not seen since the 1920s—a time, not by chance that historians speak of as "the lost generation."

The consequences today and the near future are clear and staring us in the face: eroding intergenerational mobility, lack of confidence in the political system, public services and other social goods—a diminishing vision of the common good. In contrast to their parents and grandparents, many of our youth today (along with countless older adults) are plagued with shrinking expectations of improving on the conditions into which they were born. Disproportionate concentrations of wealth and political marginalization translate into cynicism, ill-health, inadequate housing, missed educational and employment opportunities—the result?—mental and emotional distress, disengagement, the breakdown in trust, and rising insecurity that breeds fear—fear of decline, fear of the future, fear of strangers, the Other—the corrosion of prospects of well-being, of the very trust, hope, and confidence in the future on which a healthy civil and political society depends.

A half a dozen years ago, Roy Romanow, the former Premier of Saskatchewan, called our nation a “house half built,” and went on to say that he is “truly concerned about the future of Canada.

“My anxiety,” he wrote, “is occasioned...by the erosion of this country’s legacy and values, and by the growing assault on policies based on that legacy. We are...at a pivotal moment in our history and, frankly, many more of us need to stand up for a country based on fairness, opportunity, respect, and balance between the individual and society. The current political culture militates against visionary leadership and active citizen participation, but if Canada is to remain progressive, united, and strong enough to meet tomorrow’s challenges, it must change course. At stake is the legacy of a century of nation-builders and the cornerstone of the Canadian idea: that our social contract is one of shared destiny.” (Romanow, “A House Half Built,” *The Walrus*, June 2006) Those words, written six years ago, sincere and anxiety provoking then, are even truer today.

Think about it. Tony Judt, who wrote an unparalleled history of post World War II Europe and North America before his recent untimely death, observed that: “From the late nineteenth century until the 1970s, the advanced societies of the West were all becoming less unequal. Thanks to progressive taxation, government subsidies for the poor, the provision of social services and guarantees against acute misfortune, modern societies were shedding extremes of wealth and poverty.” In their own ways, nations were affected by the peoples’ “growing intolerance of immoderate inequality and initiated public provision for private inadequacy. Over the past thirty years we have thrown all this away” and have pursued an “unwavering commitment to the unraveling of decades of social legislation and economic oversight...The symptoms of collective impoverishment and inequitable concentrations of wealth are all about us.”

Ill fares the land where, in 2009 and 2012, the United Nations concluded that Canada is failing to meet its housing rights obligations and that housing rights are being eroded. Where

housing insecurity and homelessness remain deep and persistent throughout Canada. Where upwards of 300,000 people are homeless, where $\frac{3}{4}$ of a million households are overcrowded, 1.3 million households are living in substandard and inadequate housing in need of upgrades and repair, and $\frac{1}{4}$ of the 12 million households in this country are officially “unaffordable.” Where Canada, since 1989, and alone of all G8 nations, has no integrated, cohesive and recognized housing plan. (see Wellesley Institute report, “Precarious Housing in Canada,” Summer 2010)

Ill fares the land where, according to last month’s report submitted by the UN’s Special Rapporteur on Food Rights, “800,000 households are food insecure in Canada...a country that is rich, but that fails to adapt the levels of social assistance benefits and its minimum wage to the rising cost of basic necessities, including food and housing.” The report asserts, and I profoundly agree, “food banks that depend on charity are not a solution: they are a symptom of failing safety nets that the Government must address.” And ill fares the land where the UN Rapporteur’s requests to meet with federal ministers were denied, and where the official report was dismissed by our government as “ill-informed” and “completely ridiculous,” and the UN representative personally maligned as “this guy from Belgium”—sneered at by our government as a “patronizing...lecturing...academic...meddling outsider.” See Colleen Kimmett, “Canada should drop ‘self-righteous’ attitude over food: UN Rapporteur,” and “Human rights groups blast Tories’ reaction to UN envoy,” *The Tyee*, May 16 and 30, 2012)

“The state of poverty in Canada,” writes John Ralston Saul, “is a failure of our civilization and...an indictment of our political, bureaucratic, business and intellectual elites...who talk mainly about whether it would be a betrayal of free market principles for government to intervene...while hundreds of thousands of Canadians are lining up at food banks. (Saul, *A Fair Country...*, 186, 205)

Ill fares the land when our nation’s international standing has so diminished that a year and a half ago Canada’s regular, heretofore automatic rotation to a seat on the UN Security

Council was voted down by the member states of the UN—a direct result, argued Maude Barlow of the Council of Canadians, of our government’s “refusal to recognize the human right to water” its relentless “undermining” of credible “action on climate change in Canada and internationally,” and for standing virtually alone for years in “not signing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” (see “UN Security loss...”, <http://Canadians.org/media/other/2010/12-Oct-10.html>)

Ill fares the land when a half century of funding support by federal governments—Liberal and Conservative alike—for non-governmental organizations dedicated to research and advocacy for human rights, social justice and the environment—organizations staffed by some of Canada’s best and brightest, who have contributed to upholding our nation’s heretofore good reputation abroad and helped enrich a pluralist democracy at home—when a half century of federal funding support for NGOs has been slashed, terminated and/or tied to a “you are either with us or you are evil” ideological orthodoxy. Prisoner transfers and torture in Afghanistan? You are with the government or a supporter of the Taliban. Online surveillance legislation and privacy concerns? You are with the government or a pedophile. Northern Gateway pipeline? You are with the government or you are a traitor to your country, a virtual eco-terrorist, and a stooge to foreign puppet masters. If you dissent on what the government cares passionately about—its virtual denial of global warming, its ardent support of Israel’s government *no matter what*, its unbridled support for mining and energy industries, its tolerance for women as long as they’re not too pushy—if you dissent, advocate for human rights and social justice especially for the poor, for indigenous peoples, for the homeless, for those standing in lines at food banks, etc. etc. you are, as the expression goes: chopped liver. (see Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada (English branch), “Voices: the campaign against advocacy and dissent deepens,” <http://voices-voix.ca/en/document/voices-campaign-against-advocacy...>; Gerald Caplan, “Stephen Harper and the tyranny of the majority,” *Globe and Mail*, June 15, 2012)

Ill fares the land where there is a comprehensive attack on information, facts and evidence. Remember the long form census? The deep funding cuts to Statistics Canada? Have you heard about the ongoing cuts and changes to service delivery at the Library and Archives of Canada—the preservers of the documentary heritage of our nation? On-site reference hours curtailed. 1/5 of the workforce cut. Interlibrary loans eliminated. Archival purchases put on indefinite hold. 11 of 13 provincial and territorial archives councils defunded and threatened with collapse. The cost of undermining the mission of the keepers of our documentary heritage, of our collective memory, of our credibility on heritage issues at home and abroad is incalculable and profoundly disheartening; it's like self-inflicted, selective amnesia. (Myron Groover, "The Wrecking of Canada's Library and Archives," *The Tyee*, 7 June 2012)

And ill fares the land when the pillars of our parliamentary democracy are weakening with the rotting advent of imperial prime ministerial rule and of the concentration of media power in the hands of too few media owners—a process identified and decried as deplorable over thirty years ago by the Kent Commission. "Freedom of the press has become the right of a few all-powerful owners...our state police have become politicized and untrustworthy," our Parliament the near creature of those who wield power with less than 40% of the popular vote.

If Canadians heard about a country where the state police could interfere in an election—as they did in 2006; if Canadians heard that a Prime Minister shut down the government to avoid losing a confidence vote within days of its opening—which happened in 2008, a move described as unprecedented "in the history of parliamentary democracy anywhere in the world;" if Canadians heard that that an Auditor General's report found that senior officials in the Defense Department "twisted government rules, withheld information from ministers and Parliament, and whitewashed cost overruns and delays on the F-35 fighter jet program," and that to date no one has been held responsible and dismissed; and if we heard that the Parliamentary budget officer

had submitted a legal opinion which finds 64 of 82 “federal government departments and agencies are *breaking the law* by not handing over basic information” with regard to the fiscal impacts of \$5.2 billion in budget cuts—

if Canadians heard about a country where all of this and more was taking place, “we would justly picture a Third World nation that languishes behind modern democracies.” (Lawrence Martin, “So Says

the Green lady: something rotten in the state of Canada, *Globe and Mail*, April 28, 2009; Lee Bethiaume, “Watchdog Rips into F-35 project,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 4, 2012; Heather Scoffield, “Budget watchdog fights federal government secrecy, *The Tyee*, June 18, 2012; Gloria Galloway, “Fresh hostilities break out...with budget watchdog,” *Globe and Mail*, June 20, 2012)

I could go on, as you well know; but enough—I’ve had my time to make a tally, a reckoning, my time to lament, to break down, and to weep. We’ve been walking in the valley of the shadow long enough.

I grew up reading the words of *Ecclesiastes* in the Hebrew Bible and heard the words “for everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven” spoken by wise elder women and men. I grew up hearing Pete Seeger and the Birds singing “Turn, Turn, Turn,” and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young belting out: “It’s Been a Long Time Coming.” Grown up coming to trust that spring follows winter. And though seemingly ephemeral, last year’s Occupy movement, and the on-going, sixteen-week spectacle of student action and the citizen’s based “casserole protests”—the nightly marching and banging on pots and pans in Montreal—have granted countless people, especially the young, the sweet and indelible experience of participatory democracy, and the bittersweet experience of having it threatened or taken away temporarily by draconian legislation, police action, ordinance and zoning. But I believe that seeds have been sown on fertile ground; they will grow and one day bear fruit. As one banner, unfurled in Montreal on June 2nd put it: “*This isn’t a student strike, it’s a society waking up.*”

On March 25, 1965, having completed the third march to Montgomery, the city that gave birth to the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke these words on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol:

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?"....
"I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth crushed to earth will rise again.
"How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.
"How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow....
"How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

On that day not so long ago, Dr. King's words echoed those of the 19th-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. In his 1853 sermon on "Justice and the Conscience," Parker declared: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but [a] little way; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I *can* divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

And *that* my dear people, friends, colleagues, family, my fellow congregants, *that* is how I hope we will be "setting off into summer and beyond"—sober enough, honest enough, wise enough to feel and know that while it's true: there is a time to break down, to mourn, to weep, it is also true that there is a time to build up, to laugh and to dance—*may that time be now!* Time to recommence the work of finishing our house half-built; time to stand up for a country based on fairness, opportunity, and respect; to remain progressive, united, and strong; time to achieve the Canadian idea: that our social contract is one of a shared, equitable destiny and a common good for all.

"How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."