

“Richly Blessed”

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 9, 2022, The First Sunday after Epiphany, the Baptism of Christ, dedicated to Pat Patterson and Annette McCormick who work hard every day for our church and are battling COVID19 today, the memory of Loren and Mabel Eisley, who loved the earth but could not stay, to the memory of Vickie Kutschbach, to the newborns, infants, children, teens, and adults baptized into Christian faith at First Congregational Church since September, 1852, to all their parents, to all the pastors who baptized them and to all the members who nurtured and raised them in the faith of Jesus Christ and always to the glory of God!

“Richly Blessed”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Loren Eiseley was a scientist on vacation walking the beaches of Costabel, witnessing what the ocean had spit upon its sandy shore during the night. Watching the natural selection process at work, he coolly mused to himself, *“in the end, the sea rejects its offspring.”* He saw

shells with their tiny animals inside, he saw a small octopus dying on the sand, and he saw thousands of starfish which the stormy waters had washed ashore.

It was the hour before dawn as he walked and as he saw another kind of death at work, flashlights of professional shellers greedily grabbing the starfish from the sand and stuffing them half alive into their bags. There were bags and bags filled with dying starfish. It was painful to behold.

Then he walked around a bluff and he saw the rising sun lifting its rim of light onto the stormy sky ahead, and there before him arched *“a gigantic rainbow... which had sprung shimmering into existence.”*

There standing beneath the rainbow, just within its color of light, was a moving human figure. He could barely make it out from this distance. The figure was looking down. Then bending down, it cradled something in its hands, stood tall, and flung some object far into the breaking surf. As Eiseley drew near he saw a man reach down again, stand again, and fling the object again. It was the starfish the man was throwing.

Now he was beside the man. *“It’s still alive?”* he asked. *“Yes,”* said the man, and he took the star and spun it far into the air and then into the sea. *“It may survive if the offshore pull is strong enough,”* said the man.

“Are you a collector?” asked Loren. The man smiled as he stooped and rose and flung again, *“Only for the living,”* he said. *“If the star is thrown well, one can help them.”* Without other words being exchanged, Eiseley walked on. As he walked Loren thought, *“The star thrower is mad, and his particular acts are a folly with which I have not chosen to associate myself. I*

am an observer and a scientist. Nevertheless, I had seen the rainbow attempting to attach itself to earth.”

When he reached a bend in the shoreline he turned, and looking back, he saw the man toss another star. Loren Eiseley wrote in his famous essay, *The Star Thrower*: “*For a moment, in the changing light, the Sower of stars appeared magnified, as though casting larger stars upon some greater sea. He had the posture of a god. (As his scientific mind refocused, he continued) No, he is a man... the star thrower is a man, and death is running more fleet along every sea beach in the world.*” (Quoted in GodStories, p. 318).

As he walked along the beach, Eiseley pondered Darwin and nature’s law of tooth and claw; where death is some sad rule in progress. He pondered Carl Jung, and the inner struggle between darkness and light in each human soul. He thought that he was witnessing the immense universe at work in the cycle of death and resurrection. And he pondered the biblical injunction “*Love not the world, neither the things of this world.*”

But then he began to think about this world and he was filled with love. He said to himself, “*I do love this world! I love its small ones, the things beaten in the strangling surf, the bird singing which flies and falls and is not seen or heard again... I love the lost ones, the failures of this world.*” And with that, he pivoted, he turned and moved down the beach quickly back to find the star thrower.

As he reached the man with the stars in his hand on this rainbow swept corner of the world, he picked up a still-living star and spun it high into the waves. All he said to the man was, “*Call me another thrower.*” Then he thought to himself, “*he is not alone any longer. Now there are two and there will be others.*” With no more words spoken, the

two stood as one, dancers – stooping, lifting, flinging; stooping, lifting, flinging. Stooping, lifting, flinging.

Loren continued, *“I picked and flung another star. Perhaps far outward on the rim of space a genuine star was similarly seized and flung. I could feel the movement in my body. It was like a sowing ~ the sowing of life on an infinitely gigantic scale. I looked back across my shoulder. Small and dark against the receding rainbow, the star thrower stooped and flung once more. I never looked again. The task we had assumed was too immense for gazing. I flung and flung again while all about us roared the insatiable waters of death.”*

After some time, he walked on. He looked back and he saw for one last moment, the star thrower against the rising sun and the receding rainbow. Then caught in the dance of life against all death in the world, picked up a star, like a fool in love with the world, cast it as though he and the man *“were casting stars on some infinite beach beside the unknown hurler of all suns.”*

With those words, Loren Eiseley ends his famous essay.

So, it is with God – the unknown hurler of all suns. God stoops and lifts; spins and flings the universe into being. And then into our history of tooth and claw, of light and dark and endless human struggle, God births a star thrower. His name is Jesus of Nazareth. God births this star born man in a tiny town in an occupied territory of one of the greatest empires in history.

At first glance, we think him a fool – standing against the tides of empires, of violence, of cruel humanity. But, watching him work methodically, we witness in him a love for this world. He does love this world. He loves the small ones, from the starfish to the birds that

sing and fly and fall. He loves every creature great and small, every child of God, every star of God washed upon the shores of life.

He stoops, he lifts, he flings. **“Live!”** he cries in every encounter.

He steps into the waters of the Jordan River and he asks John to be baptized. And the great hurler of suns, his very own Father, leans down and says with love, *“you are my beloved son.”* Out of the waters and into his mission and ministry he steps soaking wet. He lifts and touches; heals and teaches. He proclaims good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberty to all who are oppressed and hope for everyone who hurts.

“Live!” he says to you and me.

To the evil within a man demon possessed, he says, *“Come out of him, Satan!”* Then to the Satan-free man he says, **“Live!”** To a woman caught in adultery, he says, *“I don’t judge you.”* Then he says, *“Go and sin no more! **Go and Live!**”* To fishermen who cast their nets in empty places in the sea, he redirects their efforts against their protests, and their nets fill to overflowing. Then he says, *“Don’t be afraid of miracles. God is at work here. Come with me and catch men and women and sow life. **Live!**”*

He touches an untouchable man – a so-called leper – and says, *“if you want to be clean, you can be.”* The man responds, *“I want to Be clean.”* Jesus says, *“It is done - now **Live!**”* Four men bring their severely disabled friend on a pallet to Jesus and drop him through a roof and Jesus says, *“your sins are forgiven...Take up your pallet and walk. Go and **Live!**”* And the man walks out the front door – pallet in hand.

To tax collector, who is busy on the beaches of Galilee, collecting and coveting starfish, he says, *“Make another choice. Be just. **Live!**”* To

the hypocritical scribes and the pharisees who are busy trying to manage the beaches and administer self-absorbed beach rules – it’s their specialty after all, he says, *“Don’t be wrapped up in beach management when your precious creatures are dying here. I know it is against the law to cast starfish into the surf, but do it!”* **LIVE!**

Then he invites 12 to cast stars with him. He shows them how to sow life.

He says, *“Love your enemies, for God is kind to the ungrateful and selfish.”*

He says, *“Be merciful to all as God is merciful to you.”*

He says, *“Judge not that you will be not judged. Forgive and you will be forgiven.”*

And while you are at it – **LIVE!**

He is killed for flinging starfish and sowing life. But the life force who has created him is greater than death. And his Father, the hurler of suns, the Creator of the Immense Universe, picks up his beloved son – the one whom he richly blessed, though he is broken and breathless. He carries him from the star throwing struggle. He cradles him into the palm of His hand and gently flings him from death to life, back into the surf, back into the waves and He is Risen.

But the story doesn’t end there. By his example and because he carefully taught others to be star throwers while he was still with them, they too become star throwers. Throughout time, they speak his words, **“Live!”**

They raise the dead. They heal the broken hearted. They release the prisoners. They bring justice to the oppressed. They bind up the wounds of warriors in this life across the beaches of all time.

Under the rainbow of promise, still alive among the nations, the star throwers of this world, stand as a witness as the surf crashes to the beach. They stoop down, they lift high, they fling far – casting hope and life out into the surf.

Was he a fool? Was he a Don Quixote-type chaser of windmills, this Star Thrower of ours? Was this man spinning stars back to life just one single, solitary Sower against too much death? Was his life wasted? Or was he God's new creation? Was he God's Eternal "Amen" – who was able to "*wipe away every tear from our eyes?*"

I cannot answer for you. I can only answer for myself. All I know is this. He has knelt down by me, picked me up from the crashing tides, placed me in the palm of his hand, stood, and flung me far into the surf and said, "*Timothy, Live.*"

And there, in the water of life, in the living waters of baptism, I have found the others whom he cast into the sea of love with me. They are from every nation. They are of every tongue. They are from every faith. They are every color, gender and sexual identity of human creation. They are the smallest and the most fragile. And they are also the largest and the ones we believed were the strongest and most well-healed – but were wounded just like the rest of us. And to each he spoke the same words, "**Live!**"

The Star Thrower of Nazareth is still stooping, lifting and flinging life into being. He is still alive among the nations. He is still calling us, even now to the edge of the water, to the table of grace and to the reconciling of differences between each other, between all people and all creation.

We are ALL richly blessed. So – let's **Live!**

Reference is to Loren Easley, *The Unexpected Universe*, Harcourt Brace, 1969, and the “Epilogue” of *GodStories* by H. Stephen Shoemaker, Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA, 1998, pp. 317-322.