



“FALLING OFF THE BIKE”

Lamentations 5:1-21, Psalm 148



APRIL 24, 2016

EARTH DAY

Pastor Brad

In the small suburban town of Chatham NJ, behind the elementary school there are some woods and a small pond. We would fish there for sunfish in the summer – until the green scum took over, and it was a great place to skate in the winter. Behind the pond is the town dump -- a wonderful place to explore, and find all sorts of treasures – at least, for an eleven year old, anyway. But behind the dump, was an area where there was a freeway under construction and they seemed to have just quit building it right in the middle of the job.

Now when I was a kid, I fancied myself an adventurer/explorer type. That place was awesome for riding my old Schwinn -- with the banana seat and the sissy bar – up and down and around the big piles of dirt, I took my bike all over that place! Even the cloverleaf had been started with the exits and the onramps. So, naturally, it was with a sense of oblivious invincibility that day when I rode up the highest mound of dirt to take in what I considered the most promising challenge of my bike riding career.

I don't know how I could've missed it all the other times I was there, but there I was at the top of the biggest, most exhilarating pile of dirt I'd ever seen. I think it was where the highway was going to go over the over pass which hadn't been built yet. It was glorious! I sat there at the top gazing down at what was surely going to be the highlight of my preadolescent life – full speed down this bumpy dirt hill, pocked with dips and something like dirt moguls, I guess, for lack of a better word.

This truly promised to be a fantastically challenging ride. At the bottom was the piece de resistance: a piece of plywood, cut in half lengthwise, acting like a footbridge across a ditch where the median would eventually be. Beyond that was a small ramp-like rise up to the other side that would send me flying into an airborne eleven year old's idea of heaven. Then I would land in a cool Evil Knievel skid, just short of the concrete barrier on the other side of the freeway.

I took a deep breath. I brushed my hair back off my forehead – helmet? What helmet – and pushed off. It didn't take long at all for me to realize that I had made the biggest mistake of my 11-year bike-riding career. What had seemed like a benign slope at the top turned out be much steeper than I anticipated. Remember those bikes we had as kids, without

hand brakes -- if the wheels are turning so are the pedals? Those dirt moguls sent the pedals of my bike spinning so fast there was no way I could keep up or gain control.

I could see the bridge rushing up at me faster and faster! Bridge? It was a half a piece of plywood for crying out loud! I knew that I was either going to miss the bridge and go right down into the ditch like a bowling ball in the gutter, or I would indeed catch air (which was sounding less and less fun at the moment) and smash head first into that concrete barrier which now appeared to be more rebar than concrete! I was terrified – my entire eleven years flashed before my eyes, and realized what a horrible mistake I'd made. What could I do?

And in an instant -- Looking back it must've been divine intervention – in an instant I heard a voice utter one simple word: “fall.” Immediately I knew there was only one thing to do. I had to suck it up and fall off my bike now, or face an even worse outcome when I got to the bottom.

So I leaned a little to left and the bike's front tire caught a rock, and down I went – knees first, hands out in front, into the dirt and gravel I tumbled. And the pain! I looked at my knees, red with blood, rocks and dirt embedded in the wounds. My elbows and hands were a bloody mess too. But my head and the rest of me seemed fine. I shakily got up, picked up my bike and slowly, painfully, I managed to make my way back past the dump, around the pond with the green scum, and back to my house.

As I got close to the house, I saw dad on the screened in porch reading his paper. He got up and came out to meet me, saying, “Looks like you messed up pretty good.” And he took me inside and helped me clean out the bloody mess on my knees and elbows. I had a serious case of road rash, but luckily nothing was broken – except maybe my pride. Dad promised me that when I was better we would go walking in the woods again, together.

That ride that day taught me two of the most important lessons of my life. First just because you think you can pull off something really awesome, and risky, doesn't mean you should. Your perspective might be clouded by delusions of immature thinking or unrealistic

visions of self-gratification. And second, when things are careening down hill at out of control speeds, the best thing is to just fall.

Today I submit to you that the history of human progress is like the immature thinking and unrealistic visions of self-gratification of an 11-year old daredevil. We really thought we could pull it off. Like an invincible 11-year old we stood at the top of the hill looking down on a world we were confident we could conquer.

We thought our plan would work out gloriously, poised there on the wheels of human invention in areas of science, technology, energy production, capitalist economics, and industrialization. Sure there would be bumps along the way, but they make the adventure that much more exciting. And the prospects of hitting that ramp and soaring into the air with carefree abandon – free from any concerns but our own pleasure and exhilaration – well, it would be foolish, unpatriotic even -- to ignore the promise of such a future.

The difference of course is that it isn't just one 11-year old on a bike, is it? It's all of western civilization, on a gigantic bulldozer, built by the subjugated labor of non-whites and the poor; bought with the blood of military conflict, stripping the entire landscape as it careens down the mountainside, crushing any and every life-form in its way. The whole time it's spewing noxious exhaust into the air, spilling toxins into our neighborhoods and waterways, exploding all around us in industrial accidents, poisoning the land, water, and air from equator to pole – an ecological crucifixion.

Today, we are joining more and more people who are celebrating the earth as God's creation. We're reading verses that exalt the essential value of God's created world. We're singing hymns that join our voices with the trees and the animals and the waterways in praise of our Creator.

Today, as we celebrate Earth day last Friday, it's my duty to share a prophetic word with you – a reminder about the state of God's creation. I mean, just because we think we can pull off something really awesome -- but really risky, like extreme energy extraction with mountaintop removal and fracking – doesn't mean we should actually do it. As a

civilization, we are careening down a bumpy hill, and we're on a collision course with global ecological disaster (We are!).

I know it's depressing, but please receive it in the spirit in which it's intended. Our telling the truth about the state of our world is like a form of biblical lament. How many of you have spent much time reading Lamentations? (Some Psalms are psalms of lament.) I like lamentations – they sound like real people having real problems – yelling at God and being snippy. It's OK – God can take it.

But a lament, according to theologian Walter Brueggeman, achieves three things: it recognizes the reality of injustice, loss, and grief; it names that injustice as intolerable; and ultimately moves us to action to follow God's call to make it right.

As a people of faith, I call on all of us today to hear and repeat the words of the psalm, which calls us to rejoice in God's laws of the natural world that can revive our souls with value that surpasses gold or honey. And to hear and repeat the prophetic warnings of Lamentations, which paint a vivid picture of what happens if we keep careening down this mountainside and smash head-long into the barrier. In fact, the nonhuman inhabitants of the earth and the impoverished people of the world are already crying out with the biblical words:

*“Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens.
³We have become orphans.... ⁴We must pay for the water we drink; the wood we
 get must be bought. ⁵With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven; ... we are
 given no rest... ⁹We get our bread at the peril of our lives, because of the sword
 in the wilderness,” [which is a sword of our own making, I might add]
 “...Because of this our hearts are sick, because of these things our eyes have
 grown dim.”*

And still – can you hear it? Can you hear the voice calling to us just as we're realizing that the machine is going too fast? It's going too fast and the pedals are spinning, and our childish feet can't keep up -- we're out of control. Can you hear the word? I can; 'fall.' Fall

off the bike. Fall off the machine before it's too late. Just lean a little to the left (pun intended) and we can avoid the worst-case scenario.

Yes, it'll hurt. Of course, it'll hurt to give up our comfortable, convenient lifestyles. Yes, it'll bruise us to stop living beyond earth's means. (I have enough trouble trying not to live beyond my own means, let alone the earth's!). Our elbows will get hurt when we relinquish our attitudes of personal and institutional privilege.

And yes, our knees will be scraped and bloodied when we fall into a downwardly mobile, ecologically healing way of life. It doesn't sound like much fun to me. But as Christ-followers we need to proclaim both the law of the lamentation and its Gospel as well, because there is good news – there is hope at the end of that passage: *“But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations... Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored...”*

When we proclaim the truth that God is bigger than that bicycle – bigger than the machine we created; bigger even than the beautiful, suffering planet that we're killing. When we proclaim the truth about the mercy of God, we offer hope that turning is possible, and the grace of God awaits us.

Like my dad, the good and loving Parent will come out to our prodigal, preadolescent, wounded selves, take the machine from us, shaking his head saying, “Looks like you messed things up pretty good.”

But the Parent will sit down with us, wipe the tears from our eyes, clean out our bloody, dirt-crusted wounds, and promise us that when we have healed -- when the earth has healed -- we'll walk in the woods together once again.

Amen.