

Do you have a love song? One that you hum under your breath? One that fills you with memories when you hear it on the radio? One that takes you back to prom or makes you cringe? I have news for you: you’re not the only one. People have been singing about love for thousands of years. Songwriter Linford Detweiler of the band Over the Rhine says that the three subjects available to human beings to write about are God, love, and death.<sup>1</sup> Humanity has tried to make sense of these three in all types of genres since the beginning.

Even the prophet Isaiah had a love song, but it certainly wasn’t “My Heart Will Go On” by Celine Dion or “Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic” by The Police. This love song was about a vineyard. A regular, ordinary vineyard.

The book of Isaiah begins and ends with agricultural imagery because of how connected natural life was to the book’s message of hope and redemption, of judgment and growth. The vineyard imagery pops up multiple times throughout the 66 chapters of Isaiah. It mattered to this city-dwelling Isaiah to talk about agriculture and nature constantly in prophecy and prose. It mattered because he wanted to use metaphors that his agrarian society could relate to their lives.<sup>2</sup> In a culture that understood its deep connection to the earth, these metaphors are entirely right. But it also mattered because of the parallels in human rhythms. Cycles like birth and death, growth and stunted growth, etc. can be found in our lives and the life of creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Meredith Holladay, “Leaving the Edges Wild: An Interview with Over the Rhine, Part 2,” *Patheos*, last modified October 11, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/goodletters/2013/10/leaving-the-edges-wild-an-interview-with-over-the-rhine-part-2/>

<sup>2</sup> Patricia K. Tull, “The Politics of Isaiah 5:1-7,” last modified August 12, 2013, <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-isaiah/>

Isaiah starts out this poetic section in the third person, and the owner breaks in and starts telling the story. The owner explains that they had gathered all the best ingredients for a success story: good land, healthy vines, a watchtower to keep out predators, a winepress. But despite all the planning that the owner did, his crop still went bad. This love song turns into grief and anger very quickly. The careful attention and expected results did not appear for this vineyard. Rather, the Hebrew tells us that it was injustice and distress in the vineyard. This passage isn’t calling us into nihilism. It isn’t calling us to stop trying because our work will get undone. Rather, it is calling us to love deeply and to act on that love. Prophetic witness roots itself in love, not contempt, according to eco-theologian Ched Meyers. He claims that the work of prophets begins and ends in love because it is the root of all intention.<sup>3</sup>

50 years ago, a forestry engineer from Senegal presented a paper in New Delhi at the General Assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. His name is Baba Dioum. You may not know his name, but you might know this quote from his paper instead: 'In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.'<sup>4</sup>

Global citizens have “12 years left to limit climate change catastrophe” according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that presented their findings this week.<sup>5</sup> A month ago, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres states, “Every day we fail to act is a day that we

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<sup>3</sup> Ched Meyers, “A Reflection Isaiah 5, Ecological Solipsism, and “Watershed Discipleship,” ” *Partner’s Circle E-News*, Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, June 2010.

<sup>4</sup> “Baba Dioum,” [http://en.microcosmaquariumexplorer.com/wiki/Baba\\_Dioum](http://en.microcosmaquariumexplorer.com/wiki/Baba_Dioum).

<sup>5</sup> “IPCC presents findings of the Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C at event to discuss Viet Nam's response to climate change,” Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change press release, last modified October 10 2018, [http://www.ipcc.ch/news\\_and\\_events/pr\\_outreach\\_vietnam\\_2018.shtml](http://www.ipcc.ch/news_and_events/pr_outreach_vietnam_2018.shtml).

step a little closer towards a fate that none of us wants – a fate that will resonate through generations in the damage done to humankind and life on earth.”<sup>6</sup> His words a month ago and the release of this study put a timestamp on what needs to be done if we are to make the changes we need to make in order to lessen the damage that we’re doing to our precious planet.<sup>7</sup> The vintner loved his vineyard. They acted out this love through understanding what it needed in order to thrive. I imagine that they understood what it needed to thrive because someone taught them how to cultivate the land. While we may not have vineyards that we tend, we do have places that stir passion in us. Natural places we love, like a favorite trail or park. Urban places we love, like our block or community center. These places can be our vineyards, too.

In order to do something about this, we can start by looking around us to what we love or what someone can teach us to love. We may not have vineyards, but we do have something else. We have a watershed--multiple watersheds, actually--that surround this area. There is water under us and around us right now. Without maintaining this precious resource, life as we know it would no longer exist. A movement of naturalists, activists, and theologians in California called Watershed Discipleship started multiple years ago.<sup>8</sup> These people believe that our task is to re-place ourselves in the natural world, wherever we live. When I say re-place, I do not mean taking ourselves out of the equation. I mean remembering where we are located, understanding what that means, and what our relationship to the ecosystem around us looks like.<sup>9</sup> You do not

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<sup>6</sup> “ ‘Direct existential threat’ of climate change nears point of no return, warns UN chief,” last modified September 10 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1018852>

<sup>7</sup> “Global Warming Report an 'Ear-splitting Wake-up Call' Warns UN Chief,” last modified October 8 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/10/1022492>

<sup>8</sup> “What Is a Watershed?” <https://watersheddiscipleship.org/what-is-a-watershed/>

<sup>9</sup> “What Is Watershed Discipleship?” <https://watersheddiscipleship.org/what-is-wd/>

need to be a scientist or an environmental activist in order to care about clean water or reducing air pollution. They call this kind of living discipleship because a disciple is simply a student of something or someone. The Watershed Discipleship movement encourages people to become students of the natural world around them so they can live out their faith in a tangible, environmental way.

A significant way that we can do this, as people currently sitting on top of the Jones Falls Watershed, is to advocate for cleaner use of natural resources. Taking care of creation's gifts like water and air matters for the health of all life, not simply for our consumptive needs. In the state of Maryland, nearly 60% of the energy that turns on the lights and keeps us warm in our sanctuaries is made by burning fossil fuels.<sup>10</sup> This type of energy makes people sick and damages the climate. It traps heat in our atmosphere, which causes damage for us and our global neighbors. We are seeing this damage in the extreme right now because of the intense natural disaster all over the country: the forest fires in California and Oregon, the hurricane damage in Florida and the Carolinas. The United States is second in the world behind China for fossil fuel emissions.<sup>11</sup> We have a responsibility as citizens of this watershed and of this planet--of this vineyard that God has given us to tend--to get angry enough to do something about this planet that we love. We can take on the global crisis by starting local, with the resources that we use and with the watershed that we know.

Today, Brown Memorial is one of over 70 congregations that are advocating for the precious resources of our state during the Climate in the Pulpit series in October. Pastors, rabbis, and imams are speaking out and inviting others to do the same in their houses of worship this

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<sup>10</sup> “Climate in the Pulpits Maryland Fact Sheet,” reused with permission of Interfaith Power & Light DMV.

<sup>11</sup> “Global Warming Report.”

month. The issue at hand for Climate in the Pulpit is the Maryland Clean Energy Jobs Initiative, which is now in its second year. Over 120 faith communities have already joined in support of this campaign.<sup>12</sup> Saying yes to this initiative means saying yes to strengthening Maryland’s clean energy law. Doing this would have an impact in four key ways: doing away with trash incineration; ensuring that at least half of our energy is renewable by 2030, the year that the UN set in their climate study that I mentioned earlier.<sup>13</sup> This initiative also includes a commitment to fund clean energy workforce development, providing training and jobs for our neighbors.<sup>14</sup> By supporting clean energy in our state, we are saying yes to protecting our watershed for generations to come.

Love is the heart of the matter. Watershed disciples must love what they insist needs transformation. We must love the vineyard we’ve been given to tend. And sometimes, that love turns into anger and grief when the resources we have tended do not turn out the way we planned. This is one of those times, fellow watershed disciples. This is one of the times to feel angry about the trash in our streets winding up in the Chesapeake. This is one of those times to show our natural resources matter to us. It is not the time to sit back and wait for someone else to treat the resources on our blocks or in our neighborhoods differently. To paraphrase Baba Dioum, the forestry engineer from 50 years ago, these changes start with each of us learning, understanding, and loving. We cannot save what we do not love.

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<sup>12</sup> “Climate Pulpit Resources,” <https://www.ipldmv.org/climatepulpitresources>

<sup>13</sup> “Maryland Clean Energy Jobs Initiative,” <https://www.cleanenergyjobs.org/>

<sup>14</sup> “Maryland Clean Energy Jobs.”