

Two Are Better Than One
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
December 8, 2024
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“There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”¹

In the opening line of his book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C.S. Lewis tells the reader all they need to know about the Pevensies’ cousin, Eustace. He is quite dreadful, delighting in making everyone around him miserable. His cousins, Lucy and Edmund, find it impossible to be around him. Eustace has no friends and regularly thinks himself the victim even though he is practically always the aggressor. Lucy, Edmund, and Eustace are magically transported to Narnia and a new adventure begins on board the Dawn Treader. The ship of Lucy and Edmund’s dear friend, Caspian, King of Narnia.

Lucy and Edmund are delighted, but Eustace decides he wants to be as miserable as possible. And he wants to make everyone around him miserable as well. He thinks he deserves special treatment over and above everyone else.

Eustace degrades Reepicheep the Mouse, a noble knight of Narnia, by sneaking up behind him, grabbing him by the tail and swinging him around and around. Eustace loudly complains that he is not given private quarters on the boat. He refuses to pitch in and help as they sail. When the water supplies are running low and everyone only gets a certain amount each day, he steals more than his share in the night thinking he deserves more.

After many days at sea battling a storm, the storm subsides and they come upon an island. The Dawn Treader sustained quite a bit of damage in the storm so they must make camp and begin searching for materials to repair the ship. Eustace, however, decides he needs to sleep because he hadn’t been able to during the storm. So, he sneaks off all by himself up into the mountains of this mysterious island to sleep and then come back after he is well-rested and most of the work is done.

Eustace begins his hike, climbing up and up until he reaches a pool of water. A dragon stumbles out of a cave by the pool, but quickly dies. Eustace makes his way to the dragon’s cave thinking it might be a good place to sleep and finds a pile of treasure—treasure that is all his. Treasure that he will use to get far away from his horrible cousins and Caspian to live a solitary life of luxury elsewhere.

He loads his pockets, puts on a gold arm band, and then settles down to sleep on top of his treasure. When he wakes up, something is terribly wrong—he has become a dragon. Through a series of events, Eustace makes his way back to the shore and finds the crew of the Dawn Treader. He is able to communicate and Lucy is able to understand that the dragon is Eustace.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 1.

As a dragon, Eustace is much more helpful than as a human. He helps gather trees to repair the ship. He provides warmth when people need it. He offers rides on his back for the crew to see the island. Everyone likes Eustace much more as a dragon, and Eustace begins to soften and to like the crew. It's quite miserable being a dragon, but Eustace finds that the relationships he now has with the crew is the only thing keeping him from complete despair.

Through being a dragon, Eustace learns what the author of our text from Ecclesiastes tells us this morning: two are better than one.

Ecclesiastes is thought to be written by a sage named Qoheleth. Qoheleth has searched everywhere "under the sun" for a sense of purpose and meaning in life before the inevitability of death. The book of Ecclesiastes seeks to answer the question, "What is the point?" What is the point of life? Does God care about what happens to any of us? Is God actually at work in the world? Will justice happen? Or does the world turn on and on repeating the same endless cycle?

It's fitting for Advent. In Advent we find ourselves at the beginning of another church year and we wonder if this year will look that different from the last. We are waiting for the light to break through, for peace to prevail, for justice to roll down. And we are once again wondering if the light really will break through, if the Christ-child really will be born, because the world is bleak at best right now.

Qoheleth has seen everything "under the sun." He's seen everything, and because of that he is not very optimistic about much. He doesn't find every answer he is looking for, but what he does find and what he does know is that whatever life brings, we can't go it alone. Two are better than one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. Community is essential.

Community is essential but it is not easy. We hurt each other sometimes—in big ways and small ways. Sometimes we speak without thinking and hurt someone's feelings. Sometimes we let one among us fall and we don't help them back up. Sometimes we fire off a social media post or comment and don't think of its impact. Sometimes we drop the ball and we don't check-in on folks when we should. Sometimes we participate both implicitly and explicitly in systems that harm and oppress: racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, capitalism. Sometimes we don't own the hurt we've caused. Sometimes we're unwilling to admit we were wrong. Sometimes we are unwilling to do the work to make it right.

If you've heard me say it once, you've heard it a million times by now, we need each other, our lives depend on each other. And I don't just mean those of us in this room. I mean the people outside on the street, across town, across the country, across the world. I mean the people who don't look like us, think like us, or act like us. All of us. We are all intimately and intricately connected as human beings, as children of God made in the image of God, but that connection doesn't excuse us from reckoning with and owning the ways we've caused harm. In order to be a threefold cord, in order to be the beloved community, we have to wade into what is

uncomfortable and what might hurt. We have to be willing to admit the ways we've hurt each other, because only then can we truly see each other and be community together.

A professor of mine from Duke, just released a new book. It's called *Holy Ground: Climate Change, Preaching, and the Apocalypse of Place*. In the book, Rev. Dr. Jerusha Neal, an ordained American Baptist minister who has spent time as a missionary with the United Methodist Church. Explores how to preach about the climate crisis through the sermons of Fijian preachers—those who are living with the full reality of the crisis. In her preface, she tells a story of when she was teaching at a seminary in Fiji as a UMC missionary. In 2016, the summer following Cyclone Winston which had hit Fiji and caused destruction, her colleague, Taniela, told her that he had named his newborn son after her and another colleague. He had named his son Valerusa, combining the names “Valerie” and “Jerusha.” In the native language, “vale” means house, and “rusa” means destruction. He told her, “In this difficult year of our homes’ destruction, God sent you and Valerie to us.”

Neal writes, “My home country had, in no small part, fueled the increasingly fierce storms that battered Fijian coastlines. My identity as a foreign missionary recalled the colonial destructions of home that theologians like Taniela were working to undo. My earnest desire to assist in that anti-colonial work only got me so far. On any given day, my presence might reinforce that history rather than undermine it...In that hallway, Taniela gave me a sacred gift. He told me the truth, *Valerusa*. You are part of our family. *Valerusa*. You are destroying our homes.”²

Neal is a white woman from the United States, it didn't make her any less connected to the people of Fiji. It didn't mean that she and her colleague Taniela weren't family. But it did mean, that she needed to hold and name the truth of what her home country and people that look like her (white folks) had done. It would have been easy for her to ignore it. It would have been easy to say, “well, I'm not like the rest of them.” It would have been easy to let whiteness do its thing and pretend that racism and colonialism were no longer an issue and that she played no part in perpetuating that system. But her friend told her the truth, and instead of arguing or getting defensive, she heard it. She didn't see it as a condemnation of her personhood. Instead she took it in, and tried to do differently.

My friends, we are a mostly white congregation in a country that is wreaking havoc on the Earth and her inhabitants, disproportionately so on people of color. We are standing on stolen land. We cannot move forward in relationship with our neighbors unless we reckon with that reality. Unless we name the ways we are complicit in systems of oppression perpetuating whiteness, so that we can begin the work of reparations. It's uncomfortable. It's hard. The truth is rarely an easy pill to swallow. But that is the work of community—telling the truth, owning the truth, and doing differently. That is how we lift each other up when we fall. That is how we keep each other warm when it's cold. That is the work of braiding a threefold cord that will not be broken. And that is what God calls us to in this passage.

² Jerusha Neal, *Holy Ground: Climate Change, Preaching, and the Apocalypse of Place*, xiii-xiv.

Eustace Clarence Scrub doesn't stay a dragon forever. He meets Aslan one night, and Aslan tells him the only way to get rid of his scales is for Aslan to remove them. Eustace says, "The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know—if you've ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away."³

It hurt for Eustace to really see the truth of who he was and how he had hurt his fellow human beings. As the great musician Lizzo says, "Truth hurts." But, Eustace takes it in and goes forward to do differently. He apologizes and makes amends with the crew of the Dawn Treader. Lewis writes, "It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say that 'from that time forth Eustace was a different boy.' To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun."⁴

We'll never be perfect. We'll never get it right every time. There will be days when we have relapses. There will be days when we are very tiresome. But, the cure begins when we tell, hear, and accept the truth. The cure begins when we see and hear each other. The cure begins when grace appears.

Community is hard work, but it is the work God calls us to because two are better than one.

³ *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 115-116.

⁴ *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 119.