

February 12, 2023  
The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany  
Lectionary 6, Year A  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
The Very Hungry Caterpillar Eric Carle  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
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## Hungry

I'll bet that many of you have read this story to your children or grandchildren. Or, if you're a child, might have heard this story from a parent or grandparent or teacher, or maybe even read it to yourself. Perhaps it's a particularly appropriate story for me to share on the Sunday of the Souper Bowl of Caring, because it has hunger in the title. The story is The Very Hungry Caterpillar by children's book author and illustrator, Eric Carle.

Sadly, I couldn't find my family's copy of this book, battered and tattered though it is from having been read so many times, so, I'll just have to tell you the story without the pictures. If you've never read the book, as I tell the story, imagine a bright green caterpillar with a usually happy face moving across the pages of the book through holes in the pages.

### The Very Hungry Caterpillar

In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a leaf.

One Sunday morning the warm sun came out and—pop!—  
out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar.

He started to look for some food.

On Monday he ate through one apple,  
but he was still hungry.

On Tuesday he ate through two pears,  
but he was still hungry.

On Wednesday he ate through three plums,  
but he was still hungry.

On Thursday he ate through four strawberries,  
but he was still hungry.

On Friday he ate through five oranges,  
but he was still hungry.

On Saturday he ate through:  
one piece of chocolate cake,  
one ice cream cone,  
one pickle,  
one slice of Swiss cheese,  
one piece of salami,  
one lollipop,  
one piece of cherry pie,  
one sausage,  
one cupcake,  
and one watermelon.

That night he had a stomachache!

The next day was Sunday again.

The caterpillar ate through one nice green leaf,  
and after that, he felt much better.

Now he wasn't hungry anymore

And he wasn't a little caterpillar anymore.

He was a big, fat caterpillar!

He built a small house, called a cocoon, around himself.

He stayed inside for more than two weeks.

Then he nibbled a hole in the cocoon,

Pushed his way out and....

He was a beautiful butterfly!

As a mother who is also a pastor, I always got a particular thrill when I read this story to my kids because, to my mind it held a message that was more than the story it told.

You see, there's nothing wrong with the food that the caterpillar was eating for most the week. What parent wouldn't be thrilled if their child was inspired by the caterpillar's weekday diet and decided to partake of apples, pears, plums, strawberries, and oranges as a regular part of their diet. One can't complain about fruit consumption.

On Saturday, we have kind of a "caterpillars gone wild situation". Individually the things that the caterpillar ate weren't completely bad for him. It's just that he forgot the Confirmation class's Confirmation Camp cautionary word "Moderation" on Saturday. (And if you want to hear the story about why Moderation is important on a Calumet trip, you can ask me or one of the Confirmation kids or parents who have been on the trip sometime.)

Anyway, back to our friend the caterpillar. The things he ate were fine if they are eaten in "moderation", but he ate them all at once, all in one day. No wonder he had a stomachache!

Maybe you're thinking that it's weird that this sermon is about what a made-up caterpillar eats. I assure you that I'm going somewhere with this. I'm looking at the story of the very hungry caterpillar as a metaphor for how we spend our time, not about what we consume with our bodies, but what consumes our time.

And often it's good and necessary things. Like work. Like housekeeping and chores and errands. Like helping out in our communities, like our hobbies, like spending time with friends, with family. Those are all important things; some even necessary things; so many fulfilling and meaningful things. And they certainly fill up our lives. Like fruit. Nothing wrong with fruit.

But here's an interesting thing. After the caterpillar ate all of the fruit that he ate, apples and pears and plums and strawberries and oranges he was still hungry. And so are we.

Because all of the things that we have to do, all of good things that fill our lives do not necessarily fill us up completely. Sometimes we are busy as we can be, as overwhelmed as we can be, somehow, we're also still hungry, looking for more.

On Saturday, the caterpillar went looking for more. Forget the fruit, forget the necessary, forget the vitamin filled, he was looking for some fun! Something that would fill him up, replace his gnawing hunger that nothing could seem to assuage.

So, the caterpillar had a party. I actually wonder if the caterpillar did, indeed find himself at someone's party. Maybe he crashed someone's picnic. Where else would he get access to all of that food? After all, apples can be found in nature. Salami, not so much.

Regardless of how he got his Saturday smorgasbord, on Saturday he ate, and ate, and ate, and ate. Forget moderation. What's going to fill him up?

And sometimes life is like that too. Leaving behind the sensible, the wise, the obligatory and seeking only the fun, the entertaining, the wild and crazy. And even that is not in itself bad. It's good to enjoy life, to have fun, as long as we don't forget what the caterpillar forgot. Moderation.

After the caterpillar had his eating fest on Saturday, all that he felt was sick. Not filled up, not happy, not contented.

And I suspect that even in our most fun times, we end up with similar feelings. Hopefully not sick, but unfortunately, still hungry, still searching for something else, something more.

You might be wondering why I'm talking about a children's book and a caterpillar in today's sermon. What does this have to do with any of our scripture readings.

I have to admit that our readings for today left me squirming. Like a caterpillar? Anyway. So much of "do this," "do that," "don't do this," "don't do that"—or else! So

much of our scripture readings felt conditional; felt like a threat. Listen to this part of today's Old Testament reading:

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup>I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess (Deuteronomy 30:17-18).

Yikes! It sounds like God is going to smite us unless we get it right. Unless we make all of the right choices, unless we make no mistakes, never step out of line, never mess things up.

And we all know that that is not the way life goes for us. For anyone. Life is hardly ever that simple, choices are often not that clear. Sometimes things that have been labeled as choices aren't choices at all. So, how can we get it right? How can we follow faithfully? What does that even look like?

Do we skip Saturday's picnic? It is fruit every day? But we know that no matter what we do, we are still going to be left hungry, seeking, searching, empty. Does God smite us when we get lost, when we are looking for the food that fills us and go the wrong way and end up not with stomachache, but with soul ache?

If you read this reading with a judging God in mind, then this reading is scary. It feels like God has set before us an impossible mountain to climb and then told us that we will be judged if we can't climb it.

But what if that's not what's happening here. What if what we're hearing as a threat is really a warning, born of love.

What if the perishing that God talks about in this reading does not come upon us because of God's punishment, but because what we might choose if we turn from God is, quite simply, bad for us, not life giving or life sustaining? What if the food we eat, out

there on our own, backs turned from God and seeking what does not satisfy is food that will destroy us? What if God's choices, what if God's laws are there for our protection and not as a test of our worthiness?

The day after the caterpillar's wild and crazy Saturday, he ate something that he had never tried before. I want the kids to answer this one. What do caterpillars eat? Real caterpillars, not storybook caterpillars? What is their natural food source? *Leaves.*

Leaves. That's right.

So, on Sunday, the caterpillar woke up and somehow it occurred to him to eat what he had been designed to eat; what had been designed to sustain him.

And after he ate it, he felt much better. He wasn't hungry anymore. And he was ready. Ready to be transformed. It was time to say goodbye to his caterpillar-self, so he went into his cocoon and when he emerged, he was a beautiful butterfly!

God has given us the food that we need, the food that will sustain us, the food that will make us never hunger again. God has given us God's word to guide us, to feed us, to direct us; words given to us in love, for our protection.

And when it became clear that we were still going to lose our way, so the wrong directions, eat the wrong foods, seek the wrong thing, God did not leave us and does not leave us to our own destruction.

We were made for, designed for, intended for a loving relationship with God. And throughout human history we have walked away from that and sometimes we still walk away from that.

But when we walk away, God does not. When we fail to hold fast to God, God holds fast to us. And God feeds us; feeds us the food that we were intended for: relationship with the God who loves us, who holds us, and who transforms us. The God who, over and over again, chooses us. And in relationship with that God, we will never be hungry again. Amen.