

Sermon 5-1-22
Kate Fields preaching

"Inhabitation"

Here we are in Eastertide, living within and celebrating the resurrection of Christ, because we are resurrection people. Last week on April 22nd, 2022, the world celebrated Earth Day. And here we are in our worship of God with Communion, words, prayers, and music which will all point us to God's beloved creation.

St. Thomas Aquinas said that "Any error about creation also leads to an error about God." Simply put, God and creation are linked and if we misunderstand our role as created beings then we misunderstand God and God's intent for us to be a part of creation and not lords over it.

In our Acts reading today, we see a theologically dense piece, where Paul speaks to what was likely a crowd of Greek philosophers in the Acropolis within the Agora in Athens. Paul here was delivering a defense, or *apologie*, of his faith, but at the same time, was trying to appeal to his crowd, who were well versed in Greek philosophy.¹

In this effort, Paul notes that his Athenian listeners are so religious that they have every god covered—in their worship, they even include "an unknown God" just in case they missed one. Paul addresses the irony in saying that "this God whom you worship in ignorance, I proclaim to you"; this is a verb that is "repeatedly used for the church's prophetic witness, when the good news is proclaimed for conversion."²

Paul is essentially defending his faith — saying these Athenians have been worshipping the God that Paul has proclaimed all along.... they didn't realize it and they were calling this God the "unknown God." Paul appeals to Greek philosophy in saying that this God is the God in whom: "we live, move, and have our being." Paul says that this unknown God does not live in shrines made by human hands but lives everywhere. This unknown God is, he says, the Creator and the sustainer of creation.

The Athenians listeners, even though they didn't realize it, had been worshipping Yahweh, and even more than that, Yahweh was the God they lived in, moved in, and had their being in... in other words the Creator of all. This God, our creator did not make the creation and then abandon it. But God is with us and involved in all of the creation God made and "in God, we live and move, and have our being."

So if God didn't just make creation and then leave it then God is here continuing to be the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of creation. Humans are not meant to be masters of this creation and lord over it. We are only called to be inhabitants of it.

¹ *International Bible Commentary*, p. 1535

² *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, p. 245

Inhabitanance. “An inhabitant is a creature who lives well within the context and bounds of its habitat.”³

We do not exist in individual vacuums but live within a community, an ecosystem, where we dwell within a web of connections that tie us together and the God who made it all so. We mutually belong to each other.

In fact, the word ecology comes from *oikeo* in Greek, which means “to inhabit.” An *oikos* refers to a household inhabited by families.⁴

So how are we living as inhabitants in the household God gave us?

We aspire to have an ecological faith, which theologian Jennifer Ayres defines as this: **“a faith that turns on the capacities necessary to inhabit God’s world well.** It is a way of life seeking to become loving, just, and responsible members of God’s household.”⁵

Let’s think this morning about what it means to have an ecological faith.

In our Revelation text, we see nonhuman creation from the skies and seas and earth worshipping the Lamb of God. Let us cease thinking that humans are the only creatures who can praise God.

And in last week’s service, we read Psalm 104 in worship (read it again this week), and we heard the deep passion and joy of God the Creator. In this Psalm, we see that the animals take priority; we hear of the creature called Leviathan described almost as if it is God’s playmate; we see the Cedars of the Lebanon singled out for their beauty. This is a psalm where we see God taking joy in the diversity of what God created.

Why did God create all of this? Maybe it was because it was God’s joy. As Mary Oliver so aptly writes: “Joy was not made to be a crumb.” Oh no, it wasn’t!

This Psalm along with so many other scriptures in the bible point to how much God loves what God created. I mean, God created all this and said “it is good” — and it *is* good.

So then, we must ask when we have not inhabited the earth well and the diversity of creation is dwindling because of extinction of species and a changing climate, when the Appalachian mountains that God created are having their tops ripped off in mining — in this devastation of what God created, is God’s joy diminished?

I would argue a resounding YES. When God’s creation is not honored and instead destroyed and exploited, I believe God’s joy is diminished.

³ Ayres, *Inhabitanance*, p. 2

⁴ Ayres, *Inhabitanance*, p. 9

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10

And by this, I am making a theological statement that God is a part of God's creation and God is moved by what happens to God's creation. Theologian, Sallie McFague writes, "Christian theology is the attempt to think about God and the world—who God is and who we are... These unconscious or implicit theologies are very powerful... we rely on them as justification for what we do personally and as a nation." She finishes with saying: "Theology Matters."⁶

Theology can have a powerful stronghold over the hearts of many. Misconstrued theology really matters. Harmful theology has enabled the misuse of the environment with the idea that God will one day make a new creation, so we can do whatever we need to to this one. Harmful theology has given humans permission to dominate rather than responsibly inhabit creation.

We know this right—deeply engrained in our pulpits is the theological notion that this world is not our home. We're just travelers here buying our time till we reach Glory. And while I think this belief has been critical for folks who are enduring unbearable situations, this kind of "this world is not our home" theology has had horrible consequences for our earth. God is elsewhere, but not here, so don't make this world your home. This disconnects us from this Land, right here that is our home.

This *is* home to oaks, sugar maples, hickories and ash trees, this *is* home to a dying bee population. Tennessee is home to endangered species like the Streamside and Hellbender salamanders and Bachman's Sparrow. We are home to threatened species like the little brown bat and tri-colored bat, the Nashville crayfish, and the alligator snapping turtle.⁷

This is the creation of God and Paul tells us that God is here. In God, Paul says, we live and move and have our being.

God is really serious about what God created. God's joy is in it— and God's intent was that we remain connected and take good care of one another! The Cumberland River gives us the life-giving water that we need to live and the trees around us are the lungs of the planet, giving us oxygen that we need to live. And in return, we are to protect the Cumberland River and Tennessee trees.

Evolutionary biologist Stephen Gould said: "we will not fight to save what we do not love."⁸

So how do we get to know and love our place as people who live in Middle TN and as members of Belmont United Methodist Church?

⁶ (McFague, 2008, p. 5).

⁷ <https://www.tn.gov/content/tn/twra/wildlife.html#endangered>

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

We first examine our theology for places where we misunderstand God and our role in creation. And then, we get to falling in love with a place by getting to know the stories about it... not just the land but the people too. I hear that Minnie Pearl used to play Canasta in Parker Hall. Now doesn't that make you want to go down there and get to know folks over a card game?

We get to know the hard stories too. This land of middle Tennessee was stolen from the Cherokee, Shawnee, and Yuchi tribes. In fact, the name Tennessee is believed to be derived from the name of a Cherokee village called Tanasi.

We get to know what gives us life. The water that runs through our Belmont faucets that we washed our hands with in the restroom today came from the Middle Cumberland watershed. We get involved in our local food system and support young farmers who are having a tough time with how expensive land is getting to lease or buy. We join together and work on food insecurity in our city.

We take the time to get out into some wild space and feel how vulnerable we are next to a mountain. Allow yourself to be moved by the creation God made.

That's how you fall in love with something. You know its stories and you experience it.

This can be such beautifully rooted work. It connects us who are starved for connection. It invites us to get creative before consuming so much. It changes us as we get to know the farmers who grew our food. We are changed as we divest our monies and lives from oil and coal and move to more renewable energy sources. We are changed as we work in the soil of our yards. Our lives slow down when we bike somewhere and we become more familiar with how much energy it takes to get from point A to point B. We form community when we eat food we grew around a table with friends. We start to see the full circle of life as we compost and use that compost to grow.

These actions may seem small, but the small things, done faithfully, will be how we become inhabitants who love our place.

My friend Fred has good advice about this. I'd like to close with that. Fred is a scholar but more than that, he's a quiet, deeply genuine man. If he's not playing the fiddle, organizing some amazing event, or farming the soil, he's writing.

In his book, *Soil and Sacrament*, Fred writes: "Give back to the soil more than you take. An addendum to this credo might be this: goodness in people, like goodness in soil, must be preserved and nurtured. Give people more than you take. Tend not just the soil, but the soil people. Avad and shamar them.

(sidenote: these are Hebrew words and are God's first command to the adamah or grounding was to "avad and shamar" the fertile soil— it often gets translated as to "till and keep" but a better translation is to serve the soil and watch/keep/preserve it),

So Fred says: Give people more than you take. Tend not just the soil, but the soil people. Avad and shamar them, working and watching, serving and preserving them as if you own life depended on it. Which, of course, it does. Our role in creation is to offer everything back to God.⁹

So Belmont, let us fall in love with this home we were given by God. And let this love connect us in deeper ways than we could ever imagine.

May it ever be so.

⁹ 193-194.