

February 18, 2018 • First Sunday in Lent • Baptism • Children's Church

“Love God/Love Creation: In the Silence of the Wilderness”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Our theme for Lent this year, this season designated by the church from ancient times as a season of preparation for the great day of Easter, is Love God/Love Creation. During these forty days we will examine our hearts, the state of the creation, and our own commitment to live as more faithful stewards of all that God has entrusted to us for safe-keeping and for our joy.

It is our prayer that the worship and music of the church throughout this Lenten season will give us space to listen and reflect. That the new art in the Fireside Room, titled “KNOW, LOVE, DO--Changing Nature and Us” will give us much to celebrate and ponder. That the Blessing of the Bicycles on Palm Sunday and taking stock of the environmentally-sensitive practices we have in place here at the church will inspire us to go farther along the path of responsible living. That our new sign board out front will invite passers-by to add their own word of testimony and hope for a healed creation. That a new meal-time grace shared around our family tables will give us pause each day to listen for the voice of God.

In worship, we will walk with Jesus from the place where his ministry begins, interestingly enough not in the town square or the temple, but in the wilderness. We'll walk with him to the Tree of Calvary where he dies, on the saving wood of the cross or the verdant cross, as it's been called, the Tree of Life. And then we will follow him down into the earth of the tomb from which he will be raised up. Christ's life and mission hallow the Creation, lament its peril, and celebrate the day of restoration. We pray that on our Lenten journey this year, we will find ourselves on the other side of the grave with renewed dedication as stewards of the earth.

Remember our Advent and Christmastide theme from weeks just past: God so loves the world. Our emphasis was on the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus, God choosing, out of love, to become one of us and to dwell with us, for us and for our salvation. Now in Lent we shift the emphasis to God's love of the world, meaning the whole of creation, every living creature, the words of Genesis insist, and the earth itself.

As Biblical scholar Dr. Daniel Stulac interprets it, in the incarnation in Christ Jesus, God declares that “God is here, and that God makes our home here, his home here. The gospel places us in the world that God loved in such a way that he gave his only Son on its behalf...God joins us, down here amongst the malaria-ridden swamps and the dry, overworked hills. God makes our home his home. God declares this planet worth his time and attention.”

Many of you old-timers will remember the hymn “This is My Father's World.” I've sung it at least a million times, I suppose, and this is its theme. “This is my Father's world and to my listening ears all nature sings and 'round me rings the music of the spheres.” There's another verse not in our hymnal, unfortunately, that connects God's love for the world with the work of Jesus: “This is my Father's world, now closer to Heaven bound, for dear to God is the earth Christ trod. No place but is holy ground.” Dear to God is the earth Christ trod. No place but is holy ground.

And “if God loves the world,” as essayist Wendell Berry has asked, “then how might any person of faith be excused for not loving it or be justified in destroying it?”

Let's see how our Lenten journey might lead us to more deeply love God and love Creation.

The familiar story of Christ's Temptation takes us with him into the wilderness where the Holy Spirit has sent him immediately following his baptism. Here he finds the purpose of his true work, his holy vocation, his call. In the wilderness. The wilderness of the desert. A quiet, starkly beautiful and awesome place in God's creation, a lonesome place of solitude and humility. Seemingly desolate, but full of life if you look close. Here in the wilderness, far from the clamor of crowds, the incessant noise of civilization, the needs of so many, here, in the wilderness, in the company of wild animals and angels, he can go deep within, confront his own demons and temptations, hear the voice of God coming up from within him, and emerge clear and ready for all that will lie ahead.

I know that many of you love to go camping, or hike beautiful nature trails, relishing that time apart in the stark beauty and silence of God's creation as time that renews your soul. A piece by poet and essayist Meghan O'Rourke describes retreating into wilderness after a particularly draining year of birth, illnesses and death in her family. Depleted, she returned to the gorgeous Hoh Rain Forest in Olympic National Park, a wilderness familiar to her from her childhood. Thanks to federal protections, it is home to some of the largest remaining stands of old-growth forest in the United States.

And thanks to the tireless work of the acoustic ecologist, Gordon Hempton, it is also one of the quietest places in the U.S. Hempton has worked for years to help preserve that quiet, even asking airlines to remap their flight patterns. As a result, she writes: "the absence of sound is complete...I stood there breathing, taking in, being." She was, she writes, pursuing quiet. And in the quiet, not only did she find peace and renewal. She found an internal space in which all the conflicting feelings and emotions of her year just past could be faced and probed and integrated into the person she was becoming through it all.

As the author, Pico Iyer, puts it: "Silence is where we hear something deeper than our chatter. And silence is where we speak something deeper than our words...Silence is the resting place of everything essential."

This is Jesus' experience in his wilderness. His a desert, not a forest to be sure. But still, a place in God's creation where, in silence and in wholeness, things fall into place. Where hearing and thinking and dreaming become clearer. Where the meaning of our lives is placed in proper perspective and we are born anew.

For baby Bea whom we baptize this morning, for ourselves and all who will come after us, we need to protect places on this earth that are silent wildernesses. Our national parks. Open spaces now threatened with strip-mining and fracking. We need to preserve places where humans and animals live in peace, places of great beauty full of the glory of God, where trees and desert cacti thrive. Places where "silence is not the absence of sound, but the beginning of listening." Like the wilderness, where Jesus dwelt in silence for forty days and forty nights, listening to hear clearly the voice of God.

Like prophets before him, in the wilderness Jesus learns to listen for and to hear that voice. He would have known the story of the prophet Elijah. Climbing to the top of Mount Horeb through the help of an angel of God, God asks Elijah: "what are you doing here, Elijah?" Why are you in this wilderness place, we might say. Why have you been listening for me in the whirlwind, the earthquake and the fire?" Elijah had to learn that the voice of God was in the "still, small voice" that came after all that, "the voice of fragile silence." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks interprets this to mean: "The creator of life loves life. The voice that summoned the universe into being is still and small, hardly louder than a whisper. To hear God you have to listen."

You have to listen. Our member, Jack Fry, has shared with us for Black History Month some research he's done on the hidden meaning in spirituals. You have to listen beneath the words to hear messages of freedom and hope. The actual "Balm in Gilead" was the oil of plants native to Gilead and the surrounding region which were prized for their natural healing properties. Another gift of God's good creation. In the music of the spiritual, it came to mean the healing ointment of Christ's love and grace available to all.

How do we, as those who, through our baptism, have been anointed with that healing balm that is the love of Christ, the love of God for us and for all creation, how do we grow to live in this world God so loves as a healing presence, stewards of the whole of creation itself? "Nature. The natural world. The living world. The physical world. The more than human world. The environment. The cosmos.... the living reality in which our lives unfold?" Where do we find places of wilderness silence in which to listen and to hear? Where do we find our proper place within God's wondrous creation?

Christ Jesus shows us the way, his ministry begun in the silence of the wilderness, shared with the animals and the angels keeping watch. For him, as for us, God's call comes as the still, small voice that sends us forth with him to live and proclaim the good news of God now come near.

May baby Bea and all the children who are beginning their walk on this earth will know the joy and promise of God's covenant with all creation. For dear to God is the earth Christ trod. No place but is holy ground.

Amen.

Notes:

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Wendell Berry. "God and Country." What Are People For? New York: North Point Press, 1990.

Meghan O'Rourke. "The Noise Within: Lessons in stillness from one of the quietest places on earth." Nov. 12, 2017: New York Times Style Magazine.

Wendy McDowell. "The Way of the Still, Small Voice." Autumn/Winter 2017: Harvard Divinity Bulletin.

Douglas E. Christie. The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology. Oxford University Press, 2013.

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