

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday Feb. 7, 2021 Epiphany 5B
Text Psalm 147
Sermon: Christopher McLaren

The Christian life returns again and again to prayer. We pray by ourselves, and we pray with others, we pray for the earth our Island home, and we yearn and hope that others are praying for us, lifting us into the light of Christ. Today's Gospel reminds us of the primacy of prayer, Jesus stealing away in the early morning hours to pray after what was surely and exhausting day of healing at Simon's doorstep. In prayer he is reminded of something important, of who he is and what he is about - proclaiming the Kingdom of God to all people and he is ready to move onto the next village.

The Psalms are the prayer book of the bible, stuffed with Hebrew poetry addressed to God. This was the school of prayer for Jesus and it has been the school of prayer for the faithful for centuries. My spiritual director long ago instructed me, "if you want to learn how to pray, read the psalms, chant the psalms, chew on the psalms, live with them and let them live inside of you - they are the most trusted mentors in prayer."

One commentator described the psalms as at the center of the bible, "which bears witness to the back-and-forth, the disagreement and commitment, the frustration and intimacy, of God's communication with God's people- a textual record of conversations across the ages."

The psalms are the only book of the bible that are printed in their entirety in the Book of Common Prayer and that is not an accident. I had not paid much attention to the psalms until I came to the Episcopal church where they are so central to worship, important enough to be put to music often with cantor, choir and congregation. I became a cantor at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in my hometown of Medford, Oregon after college when I was kicking around contemplating what I was going to be when I grew up. Learning the psalm each week anchored me in prayer and beauty during that uncertain time.

With the arrival of Mother Sylvia, I rediscovered a new freedom surrounding the psalms. Mother Sylvia reminded me that anything can be chanted even the sports pages "The Dodgers beat the Yankees* with a homerun in the 9th inning." If you don't know a tune you can make one up and it can be beautiful and creative and fresh.

This past year has been one of people taking risks and chanting the psalms from the heart with homemade tunes and innate creativity. And thus, the Psalms have become a place of fresh prayer like the Krispy Kreme Donuts sign the psalms at St. Mark's are "Hot Now!" You've never heard them chanted like that before and you may never again, an original moment of fresh prayer pouring over the congregation from Johanna or Annelise or Donnel or Maren or Alison or Nancy or Sofia or maybe even you! All you have to do is take the risk. **There is not one right way to chant the psalms just like there is not one right way to pray.** There are psalm settings of surpassing beauty that I would never want to let go of, and there are moments of original prayer leading that have happened this past year that were so lovely I found myself crying in the midst of the liturgy. I'm exceedingly grateful for this new relationship with the psalms and to prayer.

What struck me about this week's psalm were the images of God as a cosmic gardener.

- 8 He covers the heavens with clouds *
and prepares rain for the earth;
- 9 He makes grass to grow upon the mountains *
and green plants to serve mankind.
- 10 He provides food for flocks and herds *
and for the young ravens when they cry.

The psalmist notices that [God] covers the heavens with clouds and prepares rain for the earth, and that God is involved in making grass to grow on the hillsides and plants to flourish. I'm exceedingly interested in God preparing rain or snow for the earth as one who lives in a state of desert and mountains and as one who depends upon stream flow for fly fishing the gorgeous waters of the Jemez or the Pecos. Though I don't really ski, I check the snow report for Wolf Creek, Taos and Santa Fe every morning hoping for more precipitation. My kids think it's hilarious.

The bible tells us that God attends to the natural world beyond human beings. God cares for his creation. However, as self-centered creatures we tend to neglect or ignore the scriptures that display God's connection with nature. If you think about it, how many sermons have you actually heard on creation or on our relationship to or planet or our environmental stewardship? [Honestly, there's been an imbalance in our preaching for centuries in more ways than one] The Creator doesn't ignore a creature's needs as the psalmist proclaims,

He provides food for flocks and herds *
and for the young ravens when they cry.

As many of you know, I'm an active gardener and a beekeeper. This fall after I had cleared the garden of its frozen tomato plants and the forests of sunflowers (that grow up anywhere I don't pull them out,) I decided to put up some bird feeders in our yard for the first time. It has been a delight and a surprise to see just how many birds are around all winter long that I've never noticed. My kids laugh at me looking out the kitchen window every morning with my binoculars and talking about who has shown up at the feeders: Juncos, house finches, white breasted nuthatches, brown creepers, goldfinches in abundance now that there is a thistle feeder, downy woodpeckers, ladderback woodpeckers, once in a while a Towhee, ruby crowned kinglets and I'm waiting for the flickers to find the suet feeder.

All this is to say that I've found a new relationship to the birds in my backyard. I'm delighting in their different manners and movement. I know that songbirds are endangered more and more, and I've decided to be part of making sure that there is a food supply in the winter and the decision has brought me delight.

The psalmist tells us that God has a relationship, not only with us but with the other-than-human life on this planet. In a book entitled The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics, the biblical scholar, Mari Joerstad, explores this personal relationship of God with the created world. In the psalms Joerstad observes that nature converses with God. **"In the Psalter the world is not mute; it is sonorous, humming with voices." I love this idea, that the creation is talking with God just as we are bidden to talk with God in our prayers.** (This is from a Sojourners article (To Live in God's Renewed World by Isaac S. Vellegas).

The psalmist eavesdrops on the nonhuman natural world and offers revelations of God's relationships with birds and rivers, cattle and trees, clouds and landscapes, mountains and mammals." The psalms remind us that God has a close and personal relationship with creation. God is deeply connected to what God has created. And all of this invites us to care about our plant and animal neighbors, not in order to secure our own environmental situation adequate for the survival of Homo sapiens, but rather because **God loves this world and has offered us "a host of friends, a community that extends beyond humanness."**

It reminds me of a litany from Chief Seattle we have on occasion used at our Blessing of the Animals on St. Francis Day.

Leader: Every part of this earth is sacred,

People: ***Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore***

Every mist in the dark woods,

Every clearing and humming insect is holy.

The rocky crest, the juices of the meadow, the beasts and all the people,

All belong to the same family.

A few years back we read an essay entitled Christianity and the Survival of Creation by Wendell Berry. It was a powerful and challenging piece that reminded us that Christians seemed just as likely as anyone else to join in the plunder and murder of creation. Berry was deeply concerned by the virtually catastrophic discrepancies between biblical instruction to honor and be good stewards of the earth and allegedly respectable Christian behavior.

He also saw within the biblical text a way forward if only we could renew our deep understanding of what it means to live within the profound biblical wisdom of our tradition. He reminded us that we do not own the world or any part of it.

From the psalms he reminded us:

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof: the world and all that dwell therein.

Berry writes,

"We will discover, that God found the world, as he made it, to be Good, that he made it for His pleasure and that He continues to love it and find it worthy despite its destruction and corruption by us."

We will also discover in our defining texts that:

Creation is not in any sense independent from the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long over and done with, but is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God.

The book of Job reminds us that, if God were to, "gather unto himself; his spirit and his breath into himself, all flesh shall perish together. (Job)

Thou send forth thy Spirit and they are created. (Psalm 104)

Creation as Berry reminds is thus, “God’s presence in creatures.”

Creation is nothing less than the manifestation of God’s hidden being says the profound Orthodox Theologian Phillip Sherrard.

This means that each of us, and all other creatures live by a sanctity that is inexpressibly intimate, for to every creature, the gift of life is a portion of the breath and spirit of God. (Berry).

This Lent some of us will be exploring a few of God’s most unique creatures that are vanishing from our earth in a book called *Wild Hope*. We’ll take a close look at some incredible creatures and their uncanny behaviors and survival skills.

The book contains stories of magnificent animals groaning at the brink of extinction. They become through this story-telling more and more our brothers and sisters as we get a glimpse into their lives. And these nonhuman animals are the hungry, the homeless, the hunted of the earth – “the least of these,” Christ’s brothers and sisters. The human animals described suffer with them. They suffer knowing that the animals’ peril foreshadows our own.

As the author of *Wild Hope*, Gayle Boss, reminds, the animals are like messengers for the many, they alert us to the precarious and pregnant moment we are in, together. There is something beautiful and haunting about this Lenten book. Beautiful to see the wonder of God’s creation in their stories, and haunting to know that human behavior and greed are driving them to the brink. **The purpose of Lent, Boss reminds, “has always been to startle us awake to the true state of our hearts and world we’ve made. Which wakes an aching, wild hope that something new might be born of the ruin.”**

Lent is just around the corner and is the gateway to resurrection. Lent is seeded with Resurrection. The promise of Lent is that something will be born of the ruin around us, something astonishingly better than the present moment but we cannot imagine it. It will only be possible if we are willing to look deeply into the crisis of our natural world, allow our hearts to be opened and feel the suffering and need of our created world as if it were our very own. It is our hearts that need to be opened, broken by the state of the world around us and renewed by the very Spirit of God that has and continues to create everything that is.

Things may look bad, in fact they are bad when one looks at all the data, but this is not the end of the story. Resurrection is in the fabric of the universe, there is a deeper stream of new life than we are aware of, the Christian hope is not dependent upon us but upon God and God's deep love for all that God has made and our response to that loveliness.

We have no entitlement from our biblical story to exterminate or permanently destroy or hold in contempt anything on the earth or in the heavens above it or in the waters beneath it. We have the right to use the gift of nature but not to ruin or waste them. We are after all Holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.

So, what are we to do?

We are to love God by loving God's creation. We are to delight in creation and learn how to protect it. We are to love our neighbors by loving the earth that each one of us depends upon for life itself. We are to realize that the closer we are to the earth, its creatures, its ways and its thriving the closer we are to the heart of God.

We can allow the psalms to be our mentors in prayer and in reminding us of God's intimacy with all the created order.

He counts the number of the stars *
and calls them all by their names. Psalm 147: 4

Perhaps Mary Oliver will lead us as the psalms into prayer,

... I happened to be standing
just outside my door, with my notebook open,
which is the way I begin every morning.
Then a wren in the privet began to sing.

He was positively drenched in enthusiasm,
I don't know why. And yet, why not.
I wouldn't persuade you from whatever you believe
or whatever you don't. That's your business.
But I thought, of the wren's singing, what could this be
if it isn't a prayer?
So I just listened, my pen in the air.