

Where You Live
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2016
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Texts: Acts 16.9-15;
Psalm 67;
Revelation 21.1-10, 22-22.5;
John 14.23-29

What a beautiful service last Sunday! I have really come to treasure our celebration of Earth Day every year. The work of Caring for Creation has sunk into my soul and I hope it has for you as well. What I have learned from the Caring for Creation task force is that living close to the earth is the best way to inspire our care and stewardship of creation. But I am becoming convinced that it does far more than that.

In fact, I would make the claim today that if you want to keep the word of God as Jesus calls us to do in the gospel of John today; if you want to remember everything he taught; if you want to raise your children who were baptized here today to live in peace with hearts that are not troubled or afraid – where you live matters. Before you come to the conclusion that I am condemning those of us who live downtown and idealizing those of you who out live in the country let me be a bit clearer about what I mean.

I want to do that by going back to the texts. The vision in this week's passage from Revelation gives a sense of what the "new" earth will be like which Gordon taught us last week is a way of talking about what this earth -- our lives --- is to be like as we are renewed and transformed by God's Spirit. That's what the word "new" really means. According to the passage today this earth as it is renewed by God's Spirit is becoming a place where there is no need for a temple because "the temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." The nations will walk in the light of the Lord. The kings will bring their glory into the city. There is a river of life that flows through the city and there will be a tree planted by the river with twelve fruits and with leaves which are for the healing of the nations.

There is so much rich spiritual wisdom packed into this very short but dense passage. I want to point to just two pieces of that wisdom. We have long been conditioned in Western Christianity to think in terms of dualism. We divide the world into secular and sacred. Worship is sacred and we do it at specific times and places most obviously when we gather in a sanctuary (our version of a temple). Or we think of worship as including certain practices like when we read scripture in the morning or say prayers at night. We don't just divide spaces and practices. We divide up people as well as believer or unbeliever. So those of us who have faith see ourselves at times as bringing faith - maybe even bringing God - to those who have not yet come to believe.

The vision from Revelation proclaims that God is not limited by places and practices of worship or even by our professions of faith. God is everywhere both within our temples and beyond. Every place and time we see God and stand in awe we are worshipping. This is the first piece that I would lift up that gives us a clue about where you are to live. We are to live close to the Spirit. Every place we go, every person we meet, every endeavor of human living is a place where God resides and is an opportunity for our worship.

Here's the second piece I would lift up that gives a clue about where to live. Look at the images present in this vision. They are all natural elements: light, water, trees, fruit. These images give us pictures that help us to understand the spiritual life. This is not just because these images are familiar but because they are accurate. What we need to know about human living can best be learned by living very close to the earth. In the book of Genesis, the human being is called in Hebrew the *adam* who comes out of the *adamah*, the earth. We are earth creatures.

Celtic spirituality understood this. You grow closer to God and find the ways of wisdom by living closer to the earth and discovering the way of nature. Where you live matters. When you live close to the Spirit (and recognize God in all things) and you live close to creation (and learn the ways of God through the rhythms of nature) you find a peace (a settled place of trust) to live by that Jesus talks about in the gospel of John today. When Jesus speaks this blessing of peace to the disciples they are not in a settled place of trust. They are in a place of dread. They can feel the rising

tides of violence that are about to take Jesus life. Remember this is John chapter 14 before his death and resurrection. Over the last several weeks watching the greening of the earth I hear this blessing of peace in the midst of dread in a new way. There is NO question that terrible things happen. I don't need to enumerate the ways we all know them intimately. When we are in the middle of them they can feel all consuming as if our current suffering is all there is.

There is something profound and true about the resiliency of life that we get to witness as we live with the cycles of the earth every year. Things that were once beautiful fade and die. Places that were once verdant and alive go fallow. If you are in one of those seasons right now there IS hope for you...after the winter comes spring. Even after horrific devastation, nature renews itself. The force of life is incredibly strong. That is the message of Eastertide...when we live close to resurrection power and listen to the wisdom of the Spirit and when we live close to nature and listen to the wisdom of the earth ----- we begin to see the world through the vision of Revelation.

What these texts do is instruct us in the posture, the expectation, and the assumptions I should bring with me into my life no matter where I am going. Look at the posture Paul brings to Macedonia when he looks for the place of prayer in territory where the gospel had not yet come. He knew that God was already there. I'm also invited to live with an assumption about the resilience of life and the power of God's Spirit to bring peace even into the fiercest places of devastation. When the chaos is swirling, I have two resources that can ground me: the Holy Spirit within and around me and the earth beneath my feet.

On Thursday night I had the incredible privilege of attending the Center for Women in Transition fundraising gala. The key note speaker was Carine McCandless. Her brother Chris was the subject of a book that later became a movie called *Into the Wild*. After college Chris cut off from his family walked out into the wilderness of Alaska to live off the land...tragically he died out there at the age of 24. The book became required reading in thousands of classrooms and Carine was asked to come and speak about her brother.

After a number of years, she felt compelled to tell the rest of the story which she did in her own memoir *The Wild Truth*¹. Early in her address she showed a picture of her and her brother on Easter morning in their childhood. She was smiling as she was compelled to do by her parents. But Chris was not. You could see in his eyes the anger and hurt that betrayed what had happened that morning; what happened with regularity in their family. It was brutal hearing about the abuse in their household.

Toward the end of her address she showed a picture of Chris standing out in the wilderness and the smile on his face and the light in his eyes stood in stark contrast to the earlier photo. He had been on a long journey of healing. And for him that healing included living very close to nature. That was the one place even as a child he could find peace. Chris left behind journals that gave to Carine and her family proof of what that picture showed. He had found peace. In fact, she said that time in his life just before he died was the time when he found at last in God a father who was faithful. There was something about that combination of living close to the God who was within him and living close to the earth that was beneath him that was, for him, the perfect crucible of healing.

Where we live matters. You don't have to live off the grid in some wild place to live close to the earth. You don't have to retreat from life to live close to God. That's the point of Revelation: wherever you are God is there and the earth is beneath your feet.

Live close to God, live close to the earth and you will find peace.

¹ You can read more about Carine and her book on her website: www.carinemccandless.com.