

Effective Hope

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Texts: Exodus 3:1-5, Luke 14:25-33

Exodus 3:1-5 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

GOSPEL READING Luke 14:25-33 Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

PROFESSION OF FAITH

We believe in God, who creates all things,
who embraces all things, who celebrates all things,
who is present in every part of the fabric of creation.
We believe in God as the source of all life,
who baptizes this planet with living water.
We believe in Jesus Christ, the suffering one, the poor one,
the malnourished one, the climate refugee,
who loves and cares for this world and who suffers with it.
And we believe in Jesus Christ, the seed of life,
who came to reconcile and renew this world and everything in it.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the breath of God,
who moves with God and who moves among and with us today.
We believe in everlasting life in God.
And we believe in the hope that one day
God will put an end to death and all destructive forces.

(Gurukul Theological college, India / adapted by Keld B. Hansen 2009)



Just an hour north of the Twin Cities lies a stand of majestic white pine trees, a tiny remnant of the vast forest that used to cover most of Minnesota - until it was almost completely logged by lumber barons of a century or two ago. Tucked under the towering trees you will find a retreat center, a place to rest and be renewed. The walk to the center leads through the trees, and deeper into the peace of their presence. One guest arrived at the front door, carrying her shoes in her hand because, she said, “This is holy ground.” Yes. Most people sense it, though not all come barefoot.

For thousands of years, people have instinctively followed the example of Moses when God spoke to him from the burning bush. We take off our shoes in the presence of the sacred.

That bush burned but was not consumed; flames engulfed it, yet it lived. Now, 3000 years later, the earth, too, is burning. The question we face during this critical decade is, will human life and all life as we know it be destroyed?



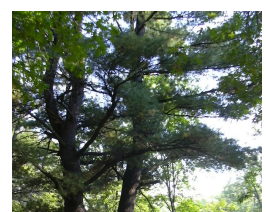
In response to the climate crisis, in 2015, Pope Francis named September 1 as World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. The Burning Bush is the symbol for a month-long Season of Creation, where Christians around the globe take time to praise the Creator and listen to the voice of God speaking to us through our warming, threatened world.



We hear of floods in Kentucky, no drinking water in Mississippi, heat, drought and wildfires in the Southwest. And earlier this year, temperatures of 122° F melted glaciers in the mountains of Pakistan. That runoff, coupled with unprecedented monsoon rains, have left one-third of the country underwater, over 1000 people dead, and thousands more unreachable. Pakistan produces less than 1% of the world’s carbon emissions; the US over 20%. Can we hear the voice of creation crying out? ¹

You may ask, what does this have to do with me? What can I do about it? And anyway, I come to church to hear good news, not a repetition of the bad news I get on every channel. Well, my intention is not to bring you down but to rely on our faithful God to give us hope - active, effective hope – and to remind you that your prayers are powerful. Prayer means looking and listening as well as speaking, and it begins with giving thanks. So I invite you first, in this beautiful fall season of creation, to gratitude. Gratitude calls us to a deeper way of caring, and a better way of seeing. I heard of a lumber baron who claimed that when he looked at a tree, all he saw was a stump with a pile of cash sitting on it. That’s not the way I’m talking about.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2022/08/photos-monsoon-flooding-in-pakistan/>



We who worked at the retreat center in the pine forest saw how the trees gave visitors new eyes. They would “enter into the peace of wild things, and rest for a time in the grace of the world and be free,” as poet Wendell Berry says.² To recognize the holiness of that bit of land was good, but it was also a doorway to a bigger truth: that *everything* God made is sacred. Everywhere we walk is holy. The real benefit is when you carry that vision with you back into your daily life.

How can that work for you? When you toast a slice of bread, see behind it to the flour, to the wheat, the field of grain, the sun and the rain and the soil. When you spread it with butter look beyond the melting yellow to the cream, to the cow that gave it, to the green of the grass where she grazed. All of that went into your simple snack of buttered toast. And remember that everything is connected to everything else, and everything is gift, And give thanks. Gratitude is the best place to start.

Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel can give us new eyes, too. At first they sound confusing. Why would he tell people, “Hate your family?” when one of the original commandments is to honor your parents? Isn’t it unrealistic of him to ask people to give up all their possessions?

Look at it like this: Just as wilderness places can teach people to respect the sacred everywhere, our first earthly homes teach us how to love beyond the home.



Though, sadly, it’s not always so, families are, ideally, places where we learn the joy of human connection; of sharing, respecting other’s needs, and having our own needs met. This is a good thing. But it becomes a problem when we value our own relatives at the expense of everyone else in the world, when we put ourselves first, front and center. Families teach us that we are *all*

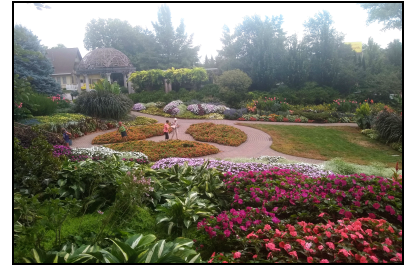
connected and all responsible for one another; we are one human family, gifts to each other. Jesus implores us as his disciples to care for all: “Love one another,” he said. “Feed my sheep.”

In much the same way, Jesus cautions us to give up our possessions. They are not ours to be hoarded, guarded, and protected from the rest of the world, but to be used for the common good. This is a harder connection to make, because as Americans we often move from the relative good of having things that make our lives easier, healthier, to the relative harm of feeling we need more and more things, to the greater harm of our things owning us. We can practically be prisoners of our possessions. The more we can let go of them, the freer we are.

Everything we own, and every human connection we have, is a gift of God, a grace to teach us of our dependence, and our interdependence, our need for one another and our need of the earth.

² Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things.” <https://onbeing.org/poetry/the-peace-of-wild-things/>

So here's a spiritual practice to restore hope in this season of creation. In your prayers, focus on a place that you have loved, a piece of the world that has blessed you: a wilderness that soothed you, a landscape that inspired you, a farm that fed you, a house that nurtured you. That place is, in a sense, yours forever; yet it was never something for you to keep. Maybe it's still just as it was when you knew it; but maybe it's been turned into a housing development or a factory farm, or even a city dump.³ You can, in a spiritual way, take responsibility for it. First, thank God for that gift. If the place no longer exists, let yourself grieve for it. And finally, pray for it: that its life may be renewed to bless others. It is holy ground. It is yours, and yet not yours.



As we enter into a period of silent prayer, I invite you to take your red ribbon and write on it: the place you are giving thanks for, and your prayer for it; or any other element of creation for which you are grateful or for which you hold a concern. Then take the red and yellow ribbons and tie them to the burning bush here. Our breath prayer is: "Renew/Restore." And may your love and memory of your sacred place open your eyes and ears and heart for the whole of creation. Amen

(Images: Sunken Garden, Lincoln, NE, created out of a dump site, and the Pipestone National Monument, from my hometown and growing up years. Photo taken this week: Mne Sota Makoce, land where the waters reflect the sky.)

PRAYERS

Tender God, Almighty God, we pray for those we know to be suffering; may we do what we can to make their lives easier, to help them know that they are loved.

God of glory, the beauty and abundance of your creation astound us. Each day as the light brightens and fades, may we behold the wonder of dawn, sunset, and starry nights that belong to no one and to everyone. You shower your gifts on good and evil alike; may we learn not to withhold what we have, but to multiply the good through sharing. May we feel the pain of those whose homelands are burning up, or flooded, or destroyed, as our own pain. May we feel the joy of restored woodlands and wetlands as our own, too.

Even as we pray for help and healing for those who sicken from covid, wildfires, drought, and flood, help us make the connection that our self-centeredness and negligence have contributed to their suffering. May we praise you by our actions in renewing and restoring your world. Give us hope, courage, energy, and love for all you have made. In Jesus' name, Amen.

³ Image: Sunken Garden, Lincoln, Nebraska, was created from a 1 ½ site that served as a neighborhood dump in 1931. Its construction provided jobs for unemployed workers in the Depression.