

Sermon: "Sacred Ground"

Psalter Reading: Psalm 104 (verses 1-23)

Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty.  
2 Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain:  
3 Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind:  
4 Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire:  
5 Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever.  
6 Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a garment: the waters stood above the mountains.  
7 At thy rebuke they fled; at the voice of thy thunder they hasted away.  
8 They go up by the mountains; they go down by the valleys unto the place which thou hast founded for them.  
9 Thou hast set a bound that they may not pass over; that they turn not again to cover the earth.  
10 He sendeth the springs into the valleys, which run among the hills.  
11 They give drink to every beast of the field: the wild asses quench their thirst.  
12 By them shall the fowls of the heaven have their habitation, which sing among the branches.  
13 He watereth the hills from his chambers: the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works.  
14 He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth;  
15 And wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart.  
16 The trees of the Lord are full of sap; the cedars of Lebanon, which he hath planted;  
17 Where the birds make their nests: as for the stork, the fir trees are her house.  
18 The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats; and the rocks for the conies.  
19 He appointed the moon for seasons: the sun knoweth his going down.  
20 Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth.  
21 The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God.  
22 The sun ariseth, they gather themselves together, and lay them down in their dens.  
23 Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening.

SCRIPTURE:

Genesis 1: 6-9 Bill McCarty

And Eloheime spoke: "Waters! Be teeming; swarm a swarming of living souls.

And flying fly; fly birds above the Earth, across the face of Heavens' Firmness!"  
So Eloheme created the great sea monsters  
and all living souls teeming Who swarm in the waters,  
all according to their myriad kind.  
And all winged-wings of their kinds;  
and Eloheme saw Goodness.  
And Eloheme gave them Blessing and toward them Eloheme said:  
"Bear fruit! multiply! fill Sea's waters!  
and birds; multiply multitudes in Earth!"  
Of this evening and of this morning there now was the Fifth Day.

A Reading from To Live Is to Love, Ernesto Cardenal

All animals who lift their voices at dawn sing to God. The volcanoes and the clouds and the trees cry to us about God. The whole creation cries to us penetratingly with a great joy about the existence and the beauty and the love of God. The music roars it into our ears, the landscape calls it into our eyes. In all of nature we find God's initials, and all God's creatures are God's love letters to us.  
All of nature burns with love created through love to light love in us. Nature is like a shadow of God, a reflection of God's beauty.  
The still, blue lake is a reflection of God. In every atom lives an image of the trinity, a figure of the trinitarian God.  
And also my own body is created to love God. Each of my cells is a hymn about the Creator and an ongoing declaration of love.<sup>52</sup>

## SERMON

I'd like to start by greeting the people who are online today.

We who sit here in this sanctuary are blessed this morning by mist, drizzle and the threat of thunder storms. The door behind me is open so I can smell the rain and, in my imagination, I can hear the river.

The door at the back of the sanctuary is open to Main Street so that you can hear the splashing cars go by and the lawns at the front and back of the building are saturated by rain. The river itself is high and a bit muddy from last night's rain...and as we drove here this morning, we discovered the roads strewn with branches and fallen leaves.

I like to think of the people who have sat in the various church buildings created by our forebearers on this land. For over two hundred years-- through all kinds of weather-- this has been a gathering place, blessed by its location beneath Mount Wantastiquet and overlooking the Connecticut. We can easily imagine the time, not that long ago time when there was no TD bank out back but only the land, trees and the steep bank reaching to the river.

Over a hundred years ago in the spring of 1909, the completion of a new hydroelectric dam in Vernon created a 28 mile long lake, from Vermont's southern border with Massachusetts to Bellows Falls, and the waters which began to back up and subsume much of the river-adjacent countryside. On average, the water level rose 30 feet and eventually flooded more than 150 farms. Twenty years ago I could still meet people who remembered when, as children, the farms were flooded.

I heard a similar story from Lakota women in South Dakota, telling how their lives changed when the Missouri River was dammed-- flooding the places they had fished and grown their crops for centuries and pushing them higher into dry plains where their lives changed forever.

Rich Holschuh, a local expert, writes that among the lands subsumed by permanent flood waters just up the road where the Wantastekw/West River meets the Kwenitekw/Connecticut River were a series of petroglyphs sites near the confluence of the West River and Connecticut River dating from a precolonial epoch, in the lands now known as Brattleboro, Vermont. In August of 2015, after a 30-year search, underwater explorer Annette Spaulding found one of the petroglyph sites, subsumed in 1909 and unseen by persons for over a century. In March of 2016, the largest one is said to depict nine figures — five eagles, a person, what looks like a dog and two wavy lines with small heads, which Spaulding suspects are lampreys. It's known as Indian Rock.

Anthropologists surmise that the Retreat Meadows was previously filled with cornfields and there are vestiges of a dance circle which had been so pounded down that took decades before anything could grow again. It and Bellows Falls both became important gathering places for when the fish ran and at harvest time.

I think of the Mary Oliver poem<sup>1</sup>:

*“I don't know who God is exactly.  
But I'll tell you this.  
I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a water splashed stone  
and all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking.  
Whenever the water struck a stone it had something to say,  
and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing under the water.  
And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me what they were saying.  
Said the river I am part of holiness.  
And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered the moss beneath the water.”*

The petroglyphs at both places marked important stories of loss.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wordsoftheyear.com/2018/04/14/at-the-river-clarion-by-mary-oliver/>

In Bellows Falls there had been a burial ground and here near where the Marina is was a whirlpool which marked a spiral in the river where oftentimes things and people were were lost<sup>2</sup>. Thus the name Wantastigok...river where things are lost.

One of my childhood memories was searching for what we called pounding holes in the Sierra Nevada foothills of California. While exploring the rock ledges we would find holes the native women had created by pounding acorn meal above stream beds. We could easily imagine living in the woods gathering acorns and sleeping in the pines.

The Bible tells us many stories too where, standing in the wilderness wanderers would have breakthrough moments. The scripture for the summer brought us Jacob and the altar he made at Peniel where he fought with the angel. The name means “face of God” for he believed he had seen God’s face at that place and he created an altar. And the well where he met Rachel, still there called Jacob’s well, was the same natural spring where Jesus met the Samaritan woman and broke the boundaries of race and clan. Lent always brings us the high ground from which Jesus and the devil looked down as Jesus made his critical decisions about his relationship to us and the earth.

Some theologian call these places portals, other say they are places where the veil is thin and we access the unwieldy sense of our ourselves in relation to God.

Our psalter reading is especially apt today I think. After the full accounts of God’s creation in all its forms it simply finishes...And “man goes forth to work to labor until evening”. Certainly this refers us back to the Garden of Eden and the curse that men would have thereafter to work while all the rest of creation does not toil or spin. But also creates an image, doesn’t it? of the whole world calling out God’s glory while we sit whether at our computers or at our knitting, barely noticing.

Sacred places open us to birth and death, to miracle and mystery. All our worries shrink in proportion to the ocean. Eternity and possibilities grow real when we look from mountain tops, And our gardens give us the promise that small things make a difference and perfection no longer matters.

Last week we had a quote from a river pilgrimage which suggests there is something in actual wilderness – in exposure to the elements, in sleeping and rising with the sun, in immersion in the worlds of the plants and animals – that changes us.

And our reading from Ernesto Cardenal illuminates that change:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://sokokisojourn.wordpress.com/category/awikhiganal/kchi-pontekw/>

Cardenal reminds us today that we too are sacred portals for God's grace: He writes a beautiful description:

"All of nature burns with love created through love to light love in us. Nature is like a shadow of God, a reflection of God's beauty. "And he ends by saying: "...And ALSO my own body is created to love God. Each of my cells is a hymn about the Creator and an ongoing declaration of love".

Like the river, God's Spirit is always moving. When we open up our hearts to this divine and eternal movement, we experience life.

Wendell Berry writes: "To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament."

We cannot know the solution to every problem but we can find God everywhere and in everything. Mary Oliver finishes her poem this way:

"And still, pressed deep into my mind, the river  
keeps coming, touching me, passing by on its  
long journey, its pale, infallible voice  
singing".