**Land, Earth, Soil, Ground**

September 13, 2020—Land Sunday

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Texts: Exodus 13:17-18, 21-22; 14:5-31

This is the second week in the Season of Creation. For those who are unfamiliar with this liturgical season, it was introduced within the Lutheran Church in Australia in about 2004. In 2006, I heard about it while at a continuing education event at St. Olaf about earth-oriented worship, and we celebrated it for the first time that year at Frame—we were among a very few congregations in the United States to do so at that time. And we have celebrated every year since. The idea around the Season of Creation is that most of the liturgical year is organized around the life and ministry of Jesus with the exception of Pentecost Sunday which focuses on the Holy Spirit, and Trinity Sunday which includes all three divine persons: God, Jesus, Spirit. It was felt that during a time of increased urbanization of the world’s population, it was important to remember God’s creation, and God as Creator. Furthermore, as people would become less connected to nature, we would be less able to understand the Biblical literature for it was written to and for people who were living in close harmony with the earth. And thus, the Season of Creation was born, and it is on a three-year rotation with different themes for each of four Sundays each year. This year the themes are Forest, Land, Wilderness, and River. But I will admit that this year, I am also using the scripture passages from the regular lectionary, not the Season of Creation, and most of the time I think it will work well…even this week which at first glance seems not to mesh: the crossing of the Red Sea on Land Sunday?

Ched Myers describes himself as an “activist theologian who has worked in social change and radical discipleship movements for 30 years.” While he has a master’s degree in New Testament, he is more of a practical theologian than a scholar, and yet he wrote one of the books that has been most impactful on my own study of Scripture, a socio-literary study of Mark’s Gospel called *Binding the Strong Man* which undergirds my study of Mark every time we study that gospel, as we will beginning in Advent for the next year. Myers came here to Stevens Point for a workshop several years ago and I got to meet him then—a huge thrill! And he wrote the chapter on Land in a *Season of Creation* commentary, in which he observes that the concept of Land functions differently in Biblical culture than in modern American culture. For us, land is the object of private ownership mostly, and public—or governmental—ownership occasionally. Myers observes, “But in stark contrast to the cosmology of modernity, the Bible does not understand land as ‘real estate’—*ever.*”[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead, Myers identifies four important concepts that characterize land in the Bible.

The first is the land as Mother of life. This is similar to our own modern idea of Mother Earth or Mother Nature, but in the Bible, it is more connected to the actual ground. In the creation story, God takes the soil, the clay, the *adamah* and forms a human, *adam.* The connection persists in English: the human is made of humus. Many indigenous cultures share this understanding of human connection to Earth, but it has been largely lost in modern western Christian culture, and in the United States, our history is of displacing indigenous peoples from their land, as well as tearing thousands of Africans from their own land and enslaving them on a continent an ocean away.

The second image is the land as the sustainer of life. This, too, comes from the creation story, where God places humans in a garden and explains they are to serve and preserve the earth, and the garden will provide all they need. There is the same sense for the land when it is described as a “land flowing with milk and honey”—a land that will sustain and delight, and which has more than enough. However, as Myers points out, “…biblically, abundance is contingent upon human beings remaining obedient to their vocation to ‘serve and preserve’ creation. To ignore stewardship and ‘take too much’ of the divine gift is to reckon with disaster….”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The third image is that of land as an altar to God. Until the Temple is built, God is worshiped outside, and indeed, later in Exodus, God says, “**24**Make for me an altar from fertile soil on which to sacrifice your entirely burned offerings, your well-being sacrifices, your sheep, and your oxen. I will come to you and bless you in every place where I make sure my name is remembered. **25**But if you do make for me an altar from stones, don’t build it with chiseled stone since using your chisel on the stone will make it impure.” [Exodus 20:24-25] We’ve wandered far from that understanding of worship haven’t we? At an earlier point in the Bible, Jacob had marked the place where he had a vision of God with a simple stone, saying, “Surely God was in this place and I did not know it.” Being on the land was where God could be experienced—and we see this in many of the psalms as well, such as the 23rd “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters….” or the 121st “I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth….” Again and again, Biblical folks encounter God on the land, and worship God there.

And the fourth image for land that Myers describes is the land as home. In the exodus the people are promised a land that will be home, and when in exile God assures them that they will be brought home again. We all understand this sense of land as home—we have a connection to the lands where we spent our earliest years. I remember once driving with my Mom, who grew up on a farm outside of Chicago. We were in Illinois, surrounded by flat farmland, and she said, “There’s just something about the Illinois landscape…” and I thought, “Meh…” but when I get near my own childhood home area, the woods and hills of southeastern Pennsylvania, I can feel a visceral connection. Knowing that makes it all the more painful to recognize how our nation has ripped so many people away from their own ancestral homelands both on this continent and from Africa.

Bringing all these together, the ground, the earth, the soil, the land is a place of security, of provision, of safety, of belonging—in the Bible, we belong to the earth; it doesn’t belong to us. And we see that sense of safety in today’s story, just one episode in the Exodus saga. First of all, the Hebrew people are on the run from a land that wasn’t theirs, a land where they did not belong, a land to which they were not connected. And God is leading them—by fire at night and by a cloud during the day. And they have come to the edge of the sea—we remember this as the Red Sea but the Hebrew suggests it is actually the Reed Sea—and Pharaoh’s army is pursuing them. And the people panic…not unreasonably we think. After all, their backs are up against the sea, and the army is a real military power where they are a community of young and old, women, children, and men, not a fighting organization and until recently, slaves without any sense of personal or community power. So they turn on Moses in panic. And Moses reaches out his hand, and the Breath of God blows a strong wind that pushes the waters apart, and so the people are able to walk through, on dry ground. Secure. Safe. Grounded. And once they are safely through, and the army with its horses and chariots continues to pursue them, the waters return, and the army is destroyed. The people are safe. And they continue along their journey on solid ground.

In the Bible, the seas are often conflated with unpredictability, with chaos, with danger…and small wonder—for boats and ships were built on a much smaller scale at that time. And the Sea of Galilee which is part of many of the stories about Jesus, is actually a freshwater lake, but was subject to sudden violent storms due to its particular geography. Indeed when I visited Israel 11 years ago, I was swimming in it one day and was a way out from our beach when a storm approached quickly—I returned to safety in time, but I understood from my own experience how suddenly conditions could change there. In any event, one of the contrasts in the Bible is between the dangerous, sometimes stormy sea, and the safety of land. And that is evident in today’s story—in which the stormy sea destroys Pharaoh’s army but lets the people of Israel through to the safety of solid ground.

In our time, the land has both symbolic meaning and substantive importance. Spiritually and psychologically we talk about being ‘grounded’ and we mean by that a sense of connection to what is foundational in our lives, what is solid, and basic, and safe. Sometimes, in guided meditations, in order to ground oneself, there is the advice to place your feet on the ground, feel the solidness and visualize the connection to Earth. Our connection to the land is spiritually meaningful—and in many of the ways that it shows up in the Bible—we too feel a connection to land that is lifegiving, sustaining, and increasingly a way for many of us to connect with a sense of what is holy in the world. Many of us are only a generation away from family farms—both my parents grew up on farms: my Mom outside Chicago and my Dad outside Albany. When I was a little kid I thought cities were a recent invention. And these days of COVID, I am not the only person rediscovering a connection to land through gardening—there were shortages in garden supply stores last winter and spring, and recently there have been shortages in canning supplies—I guess those gardens have gone well! And I know that my own experience is a sense of deep connection to the plot of land, and to the actual soil, that has nourished my garden. And yes, even I with my little beginner’s garden feel grounded when I garden—I feel safe, and connected to something deeper than me and deeper than the garden that connects me to earth, and to God, and to people near and far who are working the soil.

And we know that indeed, respecting the soil is important in keeping it fruitful—when we overplant, when we never let the soil rest, when we plant the same things in the same places year after year, the ground does not provide the same abundance. The crops are more vulnerable to pests, and the soil becomes depleted. When we try to take too much from the land, the land cannot sustain us in the way that creation intends.

And returning to that sense of groundedness—let us talk a little more about what is foundational, and nourishing, and safe in our lives. Many of us probably thought that many things in our lives six months ago were solid and safe—our routines, our way of life, our relationships with friends and family and foundational things like going to church, singing with one another, hugging our friends, basic things like going shopping and getting our hair cut. And yet, everything has been upended, first by the virus, and then there has been more upending in these months—a realization that our sense of racial justice was not nearly what we had hoped, and that it is urgent and life-threatening. And more recently reminders that climate change is worse than we knew, and understanding that the severity of storms and the intensity of fires, and of summer heat waves is exactly what climate scientists have predicted. In so many ways, the way of life we had taken for granted as foundational has been shown to be not life-giving but life-threatening. And that is profoundly disorienting.

And yet, we know that we are not the first people to be upended. Ours is not the first age to find what we thought to be solid ground suddenly shifting beneath us. And we are not the first people to realize that we have to dig deeper to find that ground that really can sustain us, that is reliably life-giving, and that is solid, and trustworthy. And like so many before us, when so much is taken away, we find that God is here. We find that the energetic flow of love in the world, God’s own Spirit, is what sustains us when our own energy is drained, and our spirits are dis-couraged—lacking in courage. We find what peoples from age to age have found that as Father Richard Rohr has said, God is near, God is now, and God is enough. In the 46th psalm, the psalmist finds that God alone is where he can put his trust:

*God is our refuge and strength,
    a very presenthelp in trouble.****2****Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
    though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;****3****though its waters roar and foam,
    though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*

And near the end of the psalm comes this verse that has been so important for so many as simple as it is, but it evokes what we learned last week about the name of God: I am what I am or I will be what I will be:

*Be still and know that I am God*

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know

Be still

Be

At the deepest place of our being is connection with the God who is being itself, who is the breath of life, who is who God is and will be however God will be, but always promises to be with us. As long as we breathe, love’s breath undergirds our breathing and our loving. God is near, God is now, and God is enough—this is the ground of our being. Amen.

1. Ched Myers, “Land Sunday” in *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary,* edited by Norman Habel, David Rhoads, and Paul Santmire (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011) 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Myers, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)