

Kerry Mansir
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Sermon for Creation 1

Friends, I don't know about you, but I have been feeling a tinge of despair lately. Maybe despair is a strong word—but certainly, unease, distress, disappointment, fear, sorrow, frustration, and sometimes futility. On top of growing COVID numbers in our communities, more and more COVID deaths around the world and a return to these masks despite our vaccination status, we've had weeks of other depressing news. Our nation has experienced devastating weather this summer that can only be attributed to climate change. Wildfires, droughts, flash flooding, hurricanes—you name it. And if we haven't experienced it ourselves, we've grieved as we have seen the images in the news and heard of those that have died because of it or lost their homes or livelihoods.

Then there's Afghanistan. Whatever you think about the decision to withdraw troops and end a twenty-year war that never achieved the goal of stabilizing Afghanistan and liberating the Afghani people, it's hard to imagine that the people of Afghanistan, particularly women, aren't going to suffer under Taliban rule. And to have watched the footage at the Kabul airport and to have heard of the lives lost and the allies left behind—it has all seemed so tragic.

And then, of course, yesterday we commemorated the twentieth anniversary of 9/11. We mourned the lives lost. We remembered the bravery of so many—firefighters, police officers, and civilians. We reflected on how our nation and our lives changed on that day.

Put all those things together with whatever personal sorrows and tragedies we have experienced individually, and we're all carrying some extra weight on our shoulders these days.

So beginning a creation season amidst all of this—a season in which we celebrate the natural world around us and commit to its care, may seem a little, well, superfluous. But perhaps going back to our creation narratives...our, in the beginning story is exactly what we need. Because maybe we need to recognize that God is everywhere, even when it feels as if God is nowhere to be found.

In our Genesis story of creation, as the wind or spirit of God swept over the formless void and darkness, bringing first the light and then all things into being, we hear again and again God proclaim the goodness of creation. In fact, Richard Rohr argues that in that "In the beginning..." moment, God wasn't separate from the world being created but that "God [actually] joined in unity with the physical universe and became the light inside of everything." (Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 13). This means that every thing we see around us is the outpouring of God.

To be certain, there are days when it is difficult to see the outpouring of God in all things, particularly our fellow humans. And while we must never forget that we do encounter God in every human being (and thus we must treat them with dignity and respect), there are days when it is perhaps easier to look for God, not in people or the news cycle, but in nature instead—in the pine trees, the mountains, the oceans and lakes, the magnificent eagle or the curious chipmunk.

This turn toward nature is not an escape from reality but a tending to our very souls. It's seeking comfort in times of stress and discouragement. Parker Palmer, who writes

about spirituality and renewal, says that a turn toward nature is taking advantage of what he calls our “dual citizenship.” He wrote, “When the world’s heartbreak threatens to take me down, it helps if I can remember that this is not the only world to which I belong. Like every human being, I have ‘dual citizenship.’ I’m not talking about another country, or a world we create with wishful thinking. I mean the vast and very real world of nature that stretches from our bodies to all the life around us, then to the stars, and on to the immensity we call the cosmos.”

Remembering [our] “dual citizenship,” he says, is not an effort to evade the world of human heartbreak. By understanding that [we] belong to a cosmos that has seen it all, embraced it all, and folded all of it into what is, [we] have a better chance to “see life steadily and see it whole.”

<https://www.facebook.com/parkerjpalmer/>

When I heard Palmer’s words about embracing the natural world as a comfort when the human world is breaking our hearts, I was reminded of that beautiful Wendell Berry poem that you’ve probably heard but is worth hearing again this morning.

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

When we are wearied by this world, by the incessant news cycle bringing us tragedy after tragedy, and even by Jesus’ command that we deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow, where might we find “the peace of wild things” for ourselves? Neither Parker Palmer nor Wendell Berry advocate for a permanent retreat from the world, but we all need rest. Remember last week I spoke of an exhausted Jesus searching for a respite from the demands of his ministry. He knew what it meant to feel depleted, with nothing left to give. We all must have sufficient rest in order to be helpful to others. In order to hear the news of the world and see our place in it without despair. Palmer argues that when we take advantage of our “dual citizenship” in the natural world, we find the peace that allows us to engage with the here and now and then return to the heartbreak of everyday life. We need that sense of grace and peace that we get from nature to sustain us as we work for healing in the world around us.

Over the next seven weeks, as we make our way through the season of creation, pay attention to the natural world around you and the ways it might bring you some sense of restoration in the midst of the worries of the world. Search for the peace of wild things and try to rest in the grace of the world. Amen.

