

Creation Blessings

John 1:1-5; Psalm 24

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Last Sunday after church Grant, Marissa and I headed out of town for a brief change of scenery. We decided at the last minute to go to Columbia, because who doesn't want to visit Columbia, SC in July? As you may know, we lived in the South Carolina capital for a season, and it holds fond memories and good friends. On the way we took an unplanned detour through Mt. Gilead, a small town where I did much of my growing up. I showed Marissa where I went to church, the park that contains the swimming pool where I wiled away many summer hours, and the home where I lived, still flanked by a large field but without the garden my father cultivated while wearing an embarrassing ensemble of combat boots and swim trunks.

You likely know the mixture of feelings that well up when you return to a place that was once your entire world but no longer has any ties to tether you to it. There was both a familiarity and a foreignness to the landscape. I wanted to linger and to leave all at the same time. I am still mulling over what surfaced from our brief sojourn to my former hometown, but what keeps coming to my consciousness is the inescapable importance of place, geography, land, patches of the earth we occupy.

While we humans, of course, shape creation, creation also, often unknowingly, shapes us.

Think for a moment about a place that is meaningful to you. Take a moment to picture it. Maybe you are envisioning it at a particular time or season. It may automatically populate with people who occupied that space with you. What about it compels you to visit there this morning in your mind's eye?

For me, today, I want to go again to Point Pleasant Park, located by the ocean in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I've been there in recent years, to walk again the paths I used to walk as a little kid. It was, and is, an oasis of woods in an urban landscape. I associate it with childhood wandering and exploring. I also pair it with what I call "poncho weather." My mom is a knitter and when we were little, she would knit us colorful ponchos, complete with fringe and when it finally got warm enough to jettison our bulky winter coats, it was "poncho weather." A season that afforded many more days in the park. There are still days when the skies are clear and the weather just a bit chilly when I think, "It is poncho weather" and I envision those woodsy paths and feel enveloped with hope and joy.

What are the places that shaped you? Summer beach trips? Fall excursions to see the leaves change color in the mountains? Your grandparents' back yard? The lake where you

learned to swim or the trails where you walked with your beloved? Cotton or tobacco fields where you worked for hours in the hot sun? The screened in porch where you watch the birds or the garden you planted, tended and harvested?

No matter where your mind wanders this morning, all of those places belong to the Lord. God created every inch of those meaning infused landscapes. As the psalmist says, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is within it.” Does that knowledge change how you see these places and their inhabitants?

All things come into being through Jesus Christ, all creatures great and small. Does this truth change how we interact with the world?

I wonder about this, truly, because I don’t think I am good about practicing reverence for creation. Honestly, I often take the clean water from my tap, the fresh strawberries in my fridge and the bees buzzing in my backyard for granted. Even when I hear of blueberries burning up on the bush due to the heatwave, the water rationing in the west because of drought, the floods overtaking Chicago, and the obliteration of pollinators all over the world, I don’t often respond with the urgency to steward, serve and restore the earth and its inhabitants that belong to the Lord.

This disconnect is, if I am being truthful with myself, apostasy, an abandonment of what I profess to belief, a sin borne of privilege and selfishness that forgets the necessity of place, that neglects God’s call to be caretakers of the vineyards planted by those who came before me so that future generations can enjoy good fruit, too.

The headlines certainly scare me: more and bigger hurricanes, more and bigger forest fires, earlier and hotter temperatures, less habitat for wildlife, whole communities decimated due to contaminated soil, air and water, more people made environmental refugees, and yet, instead of motivating me these dire new stories seem to paralyze me.

My recycling bin seems a paltry offering in the face of such daunting devastation.

Which is precisely why I need these two expansive Bible passages we read this morning, verses that remind me that the earth is the Lord’s and all that is within it. Our role is to respond with awe and worship the One through whom all things came into being. I need to remember that I, too, am a creature, utterly dependent upon the goodness and grace of God. In other words, I need to be put in my place.

My concrete, right in front of me: *Place* and notice its beauty, all it provides and requires, and then remember my place: as a steward, an interim caretaker, a seed scatterer, the one who plants and waters and trusts God to give the growth.

Professor and environmentalist Dan Gessner writes about the importance of practical hope and cultivating “tiny wilderness” where we are. In his book about the Charles River he writes,

It does seem hopeful to me that, paddling into a city of over four million, we can still see a deer on the banks, a sharp-shinned hawk in the canopy, stripers swimming below. And it does seem hopeful that imperfect human beings...have fought to correct our mistakes and redeem something that seemed unredeemable, like this river. It's not the ultimate answer, but it's something. The beginning of something. Something to create momentum, to fight inertia. ... I know that while a glimpse of a leaf through the bars of a jailhouse may be a form of wilderness, it is not one that would satisfy many of us. But I also find it hopeful that even in this wounded landscape there are still delights to being alive. (pages 108-109)

So, I invite you again to picture a place that shaped you. Picture a place in which you delight to be alive. Take a minute and see what comes to mind. Try and envision the details of that landscape, sights, sounds, smells.

I think I want to go back to Mt. Gilead again and explore my backyard, that place and where I would go when I wanted to be alone and use my imagination. I will again unearth some long-ago discarded mason jars and wonder what they once contained and who left them there. Since it is summer, I will reach down and pick some Queen Anne's lace, that glorious weed that you really have to tug if you want to take some home. I'll hear my German Shepherd, Velvet, barking in the yard and yes, Missy the goat, making a fuss because she's gotten tangled up in something again. My dad may have picked a lot of tomatoes and he might, if we're lucky, show us how you can practice suturing skin with the ripe ones. My mom will cut up the summer squash and if she uses enough butter to sauté it, I may be willing to eat some. My siblings and I will catch fireflies after dinner as the sun begins to set and, eventually I'll go to sleep to the din of the tree frogs and cicadas.

When I picture this patch of God's earth, when I am put in my place, I realize how much certain spaces have shaped me, how much I love the places that have formed me and how much I was loved in them. I recognize how undeservedly blessed I have been by the earth and all that is within it: plants, animals, people, creatures great and small. And when I think about those particular, tiny wilderness places, I want to make sure to preserve and cultivate those same kind of spaces for my children and theirs and others' children and grandchildren, too. I want future generations to be cared for by and on God's earth just as I have so abundantly been nurtured.

And while it may feel overwhelming when I hear the news and read the headlines, as a follower of Jesus I know it is alright to start small because he promises that mustard seed sized faith can move mountains and restore them, too. I can trust that the One who made all that is seen and unseen, will never abandon us, and if we listen and follow, he will put us in our place and we will be so delighted to be there, and with some of our tending and a lot of God's grace, generations from now, others will find delight here, too, and will be blessed, as we have been, by the earth and all that is within it. Amen.