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St. Andrew's, Encinitas
9/16/2018

The Wisdom of the Earth

This past Tuesday was my dad's birthday, so of course I called to wish him birthday blessings, and just to chat. Something my parent's both do, whenever I get on the phone with them, is to talk about what animals they've seen, what birds were at the bird feeder, thrilling stuff! All joking aside, they have always had a deep love and care for nature and the earth. And that's where I want to begin this Sunday as I reflect on the earth, as part of our celebration of the Season of Creation, and on today's Scriptural readings. It leads me to thinking about the wisdom of the earth.

You've all heard me talk about growing up in the north woods of Wisconsin, how distant it was from the rest of the world, how beautiful it was, and how I'd roam the forests, wetlands, lakes, and streams there. It was an area of rest and refreshment for a lot of folks from Chicago and the Twin Cities, so there were resorts all over the place. The people who owned and operated the resorts made their annual income off of a few weeks in the fall and winter, and the summer months, as people took their vacation time to head up to their cabin up north. The owners of the resorts then of course were very connected to their land, wanting to keep it as pristine as possible so that people could enjoy the natural beauty around them.

While my family weren't resort owners, my dad had always cared about the land and the earth as a whole. I suspect his growing up as a farmer in northern Illinois was a big part of that. It shows most when he cares for his garden, which you can plainly see on Google Maps when you find my parent's home on satellite mode. My parent's garden isn't just large, but it is incredibly fruitful. So much so that once the produce comes in, it is known in their local Episcopal Church that there will be a small farmer's market during coffee hour, because my dad brings in loads of

green beans, broccoli, Swiss chard, and more. It shows very clearly what Brenda spoke about in her sermon last week, that caring for nature, the earth, is not in any way removed from our care of our neighbors.

This was never a question for me growing, because my parent's made that part of my sister's and my upbringing from the earliest time I can remember. My dad was a carpenter by trade and an arborist by hobby. My mom worked for the Illinois department of agriculture before we moved to Wisconsin. A deep respect for this fragile earth, our island home, was always part and parcel to our understanding of faith as a family. Whether hunting, fishing, or merely hiking about, being grateful for the blessings of this good earth was always integral to our thinking.

The flipside of that has been that I've lived with a deep dread of what we as a species has done to undermine our own existence by our various abuses of this finite but boundlessly beautiful world. And even when the earth's signals all point towards a future that is hotter, more flooded and yet drier, and generally less hospitable to life, you can see why I, and many people my age, still don't understand why we aren't doing more as a species to prevent an existential threat. We, by and large as a species, have given up on one of our most ancient practices: regarding the wisdom of the earth.

This sense of ignoring wisdom comes directly from our reading from Proverbs. Wisdom is portrayed as a powerful woman, a human walking among us, throughout Proverbs. We meet her in a city, shouting at the busiest corners and in public squares. She is proclaiming that because she has called out and been ignored that great calamity will befall the ignorant. She proclaims: "I will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you, when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you." She goes on to say, "For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools

destroys them; but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

I imagine this reading is especially painful for those in the path of Hurricane Florence the past week. And that gives this passage a certain earthiness, albeit of the disastrous variety, but still an earthiness. Wind, storms, panic, these are all tangible things, part of a lived and physically sensed reality. Just the word “panic,” makes my own heart rate rise thinking of it. These are things we can sense in our bones.

It reminds of when I lived in Hoboken, New Jersey, and Hurricane Sandy hit. I was fortunate enough to get fuel ahead of the storm and to move to higher ground, but that wasn't the case for everyone. When I went back down into Hoboken the day after the storm, it looked like Atlantis had begun to sink, especially the western side of town, which was built over the Hudson River, and of course, was where all of the low income housing was. It was a second year in a row, after Hurricane Irene, that the poorest of Hoboken were afflicted the most by these colossal hurricanes.

So when I say this reading is painful, I mean it in two ways, first as a person who understands what it's like to live through something like this, and second, as someone who wishes we'd take the wisdom of the earth seriously. Our planet has always been fragile, and anyone who has studied evolutionary biology as history knows that this planet has had 5 mass extinctions in its 4 billion year life. But this fragility also speaks to something fundamental of the Trinity as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer: this planet has resurrected life 5 times.

God, through the Holy Spirit's creative totality, has unleashed an infinitude of possibility, of which we are blessed to live. The fragility and the vitality of this planet are intricately linked and continue to vivify our wilderness, ocean depths, farmlands, and cities. This vulnerability and

resiliency of life is something we as Christians should understand inherently. Jesus, as our messiah and savior, lived as flesh among us and was murdered on a very gritty, very real, cross, made of trees, held in place by wrought iron from red dirt; and yet Jesus rose again. Resurrection itself is wisdom of the earth and its creator.

And maybe that's also part of the brilliance of God's love for us, we who were created in the image of the divine; that despite the vastness of the universe and the fragility of our planet, God lived among us, to love, to teach, and to heal. Baptism and Eucharist encapsulate this, as we proclaim new life and water it in baptism, and then feed that new life with bread and wine in Eucharist. These are all very earthy concepts, and they grow this life in us and it fills the void left by the disasters and tragedies of life just as it helps us to celebrate life's grand vibrancy.

[pause]

Before I end today, I feel it necessary for us to go to the man who gave us these sacramental rituals that are central to our practice as Christians. When I read the gospel for today, I stop with Jesus' question of "Who do people say that I am?" My response today is that he is the embodiment of God's love and desire for us to live in peace and harmony with the wisdom of the earth and each other, the messiah. And much like Peter, who answered the question with "Messiah," I'd have been concerned with Jesus' going on to talk about his suffering, for the same reasons that hearing about disasters makes us sad and afraid, to the point we want to be distracted. We don't want Jesus to suffer, like Peter. Maybe, even I would like to have stopped Jesus from saying such things, because I'd want to cling to the person of Jesus instead of the truth that he embodies. And that's where Jesus rebukes this kind of selfish thinking, just like Wisdom in the city streets: "Darn it Peter! Why don't you listen! You're not thinking of God's way, you're thinking your own narrow way!"

And then Jesus says more earthy things: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Instead of beginning another sermon, I ask that you think this week about where your faith comes into contact with the material world? What is the cross you touch and carry in the name of Christ in your everyday living? What earthy wisdom is God teaching you?