Dwelling in the House of God

Psalm 23

Buckingham Church

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When you heard the last words of the Psalm this morning, did you think maybe Judy had read them wrong? Those of you who may know this Psalm well, who may have heard it at dozens of funerals, and often from the King James Version of the Bible, are quite sure that those last words are, “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Thus, a comfort that when we die; we shall be in heaven with God. It’s all about eternal life, we know that.

Well, actually, at the time this Psalm first came to be sung, the Hebrew people had no theological concept of eternal life, the way we understand it. The translation you heard today is much closer to the original Hebrew. “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

Do you see, this Psalm is not about being dead? This Psalm is about life, about God’s relationship with us and ours with God and with the earth and with our enemies, our whole life long. When I began to understand that about this Psalm and to think outside the box of funeral services, I began to see new and wonderful things that I had missed before! I began to take so much more comfort and hope and trust and courage from this Psalm than I ever had when I thought it was all about eternal life.

In the context this year of Earth Day, I take something else from this last line as well. Those green pastures and still waters, dark valleys and food-filled tables, healing oils, goodness and mercy are all in the house of God in which I dwell my whole life long. Sometimes we refer to the church building as the “house of God,” which is confusing to children and just plain not theologically right.

The house of God in which we dwell, and about which this Psalm speaks, is the Earth.

The house of God in which we live and move and have our being is the Earth.

The now Earth. The once and future Earth. The Earth created by God in the midst of the cosmos created by God, all of which was, at creation, good. All of which was, at creation, connected to God and connected by God. Home. God’s house in which we and the aardvarks and the daffodils and the oak trees and the great apes and the cockatiels and the ladybugs and the mushrooms and the oceans and the granite hills live. Together.

God’s house, which was created to be nurturing, sustaining, caring and full of beauty and joy for all created things dwelling in it. Created as a place where we could connect with God beside still waters and eat in green pastures and have our souls regularly restored. God’s house, which we were created to respect and nurture, just like we do to our church building because we call it God’s house.

You know where I’m going with this. First, if I separate myself from the rest of creation, I am separating myself from God. In parts of the world and of this country where people could not get outside of a city during the pandemic, the actual loss of connection to the non-human created world became a disabling loss for so many, not only for their bodies but for their spirits. There are people around the world who live in places for which that is the case even in non-pandemic. If we separate ourselves from the natural world, or are separated from it by the way our cities are built, those green pastures and still waters, it’s like destroying our cell phones and still expecting to get calls. God is present in and thru all creation, but we miss that if we don’t spend time in that created world outside of human creations.

And, even more important, if we act like irresponsible tenants and destroy the house of God, gifted to us at creation, then we also harm our relationship with God. No other creature that God has made goes about destroying its environment. Let me say that again: no other creature besides human beings goes about destroying its home through waste and neglect and outright annihilation. The author Douglas Adams wrote in one of his novels human beings believe they are the smartest creature because they have achieved so much, “the wheel, New York, wars, and so on, while all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely, dolphins had always believed they were far more intelligent—for precisely the same reasons.”

We act like this is our house, and instead of keeping it up, we think we have license to ruin it, not realizing the cost to ourselves in body, mind, and spirit.

Jamie Margolin, a young climate activist in the U.S., has written that “undergirding European colonialism was the assumption that everything on earth was meant to be extracted, bought and sold—to make an elite minority very rich. Along with this attitude came the idea that nothing—not air, not water, not trees, not animals—was sacred or priceless.” (Cathedral on Fire, Brooks Berndt, p. 23.) That is very much our heritage here in this country. I wonder if any of you have watched the series on Ernest Hemingway on PBS this month? It wasn’t all that long ago that people like him went to Africa with the sole intent not to be amazed at the wonder of God’s creation there, but to kill as much of it as possible. We have come to depend on an extraction economy, and as much as we have tried to make changes, still the earth and its creatures are regularly ripped apart to satisfy our desire for resources. And poor *people* as well as other parts of the natural world pay a huge price for this.

There is much that we can do to begin to right the wrongs of the past and the present, though it is too late to undo some of the damage and we will be living with the consequences of climate change now and even more in coming generations. But I really believe that the church and Christians have a great role to play in all of this by re-sacralizing the whole Earth, helping people to understand that God’s house is sacred. That means to understand deep within, and live as though we actually believed, that we dwell in the house of ***God*** our whole lives long. Throughout the scriptures all that imagery of God as shepherd and the centrality of water in so many of our rites and rituals and stories and all the Psalms about the wonders of creation are not just nice poetry. They remind us we live in God’s house and how amazing it is and how we can connect more with God by connecting more with all else that dwells in God’s house.

The original words to the hymn we sang earlier, one of my most favorite versions of Psalm 23 by the great Isaac Watts, puts those last lines of the Psalm this way:

The sure provisions of my God

Attend me all my days;

O may Thy house be mine abode, (O may your house be my house!)

And all my work be praise! (remember Adams’ dolphins?)

There would I find a settled rest

(While others go and come),

No more a stranger or a guest,

But like a child at home.

May we know that God’s house is our house, and our house is God’s house, and therefore, may nothing we do to and with and in that house be anything whose result is not praise. Amen.