

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 1: Reconnecting With the Earth

John 3:1-3 Genesis 1:1-5, 26-27, 31 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa June 21, 2015

For quite some time, now, I've been making references in sermons to moving beyond a primarily intellectual exploration of new progressive ways of understanding Christian theology and biblical interpretation. Much of that work over the past decade or so has involved an in-depth look at the research by folks at the Jesus Seminar, like the work of Jon Dominic Crossan, John Shelby Spong, and Marcus Borg. It also included works by others like the *Living the Questions* church school curriculum that we have used here, and by current authors like Robin Meyers, Phyllis Tickle, Brian McLaren, Harvey Cox, and perhaps my favorite book on where progressives perceive organized religion is heading, *Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, by Diana Butler Bass.

In the sermon on the Sunday before beginning my sabbatical, I stated, **"While not abandoning that intellectual endeavor, it is my intention to try to get us, as College Hill Presbyterian Church, to focus a bit more on the spiritual side of our individual and collective journey of faith."** That starts in earnest today. For the next 8 Sundays, it is my intention to present a sermon series I've entitled, "Connecting With God."

For structure, I'll be using a different chapter title each week from the book ***The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings***, by John Philip Newell. I encourage you to buy and read this remarkable book. Newell, an ordained Church of Scotland minister, is a former Warden of Iona Abbey in Scotland, where I just spent a week during my sabbatical. He has also led many spiritual retreats during summers at Casa del Sol at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. Newell is internationally acclaimed for his work in the field of Celtic spirituality, teaching and preaching on themes related to the sacredness of the earth and the oneness of the human soul.

It is my hope that through this sermon series each of us will have a better understanding of what it means to connect with God – which is simply another way to define the term **spiritual formation**. Newell proposes that we can move toward that connection not by simply searching for something from without ourselves, but rather **reaching deep within to reconnect with the Sacred Presence that dwells within all creation**. We accomplish that, he suggests, by reconnecting: reconnecting with the earth, which is the topic of this sermon, and reconnecting with compassion, with the Light, with the journey, with spiritual practice, with nonviolence, with the unconscious, and reconnecting with love.

A rich spiritual life that becomes a vital element to your and my journey of faith might just begin by internalizing a teaching about creation from **Julian of Norwich**, a 14th century Christian mystic in England. She radically proclaimed that **we are not just made by God, we are made of God**. Imagine the implications of what that means. In part, it means

that **the very love, wisdom and creativity of God are embedded deep within the heart of our being.**

This morning's Gospel reading includes the familiar passage from John 3 where Jesus states that recognizing and participating in the kingdom of God requires that we be "**born anew**," or more commonly rendered, "born again." In order to avoid that often-abused phrase, most progressives prefer the NRSV translation, "born from above." But Newell reminds us, "**This phrase has been hijacked by religious fundamentalism** [and I would add that to an extent by traditional Christianity itself] to give the impression that we need to become something other than ourselves." **It implies that we need to turn from what is deepest within us, including a denial of our human nature, because they believe that at our very core we are utterly sinful.**

As theologians and everyday people in church pews are reevaluating this claim of total depravity, more and more people are rejecting this historical assumption, and many have decided to leave organized religion altogether. That is why I want us to explore a very different approach and understanding of our human nature, which we must remember has been created by God.

Perhaps, that which is deepest within each human life isn't sinfulness, but rather the Sacred Presence of God. It's stated this way in today's Affirmation of Faith, as found in the *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, "With people everywhere: **we affirm God's goodness at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong.**"

This reemergence of the Divine from deep within us is something we cannot create on our own, but is rather something – by God's grace – we let spring forth and be reborn anew in our lives. What a wonderful twist on that old biblical phrase to be born again! This approach also helps explain the rather strange title of Newell's book, *The Rebirthing of God*. As he writes in his Introduction, "We can be part of midwifing new holy births in the world." Newell suggests that the first step, and one of primary features of rebirthing, is a **coming back into relationship with the sacredness of the earth.** Eco-theologian Thomas Berry writes, "We need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a **spirituality of intimacy with the natural world.**"

As you may have heard in the news this week, this is a similar position taken by **Pope Francis** upon the release of his encyclical entitled, "On Care For Our Common Home." I read a good portion of it online yesterday. It's wonderful. From a section called, "The Sacramental Signs and the Celebration of Rest," the Pope writes from deeply moral and ethical perspective:

233. The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.

Indeed, one of the things we learned in our adult church school class last just over a year ago when we studied the *Living the Questions* curriculum entitled, "Painting the Stars: Science, Religion and an Evolving Faith," is that **everything in the universe is actually related to everything else in the universe. That means that the earth's well-being is an essential part of our well-being.**

The Creation Story found in the first chapter in the Book of Genesis, today's Old Testament reading, clearly declares that all of creation is good, and that we have been made in the image and likeness of God. That's why Julian of Norwich reminds us that we are made "of God," not just "by God." So, **with all of creation made from that same**

source, that same Light, it's understandable that deep within there is a desire to move back into relationship with everything else that is of God.

Reconnecting with the sacredness of the earth, therefore, is a good first step in a deeper understanding of connecting with God. I experienced that spiritual connection with the earth during my sabbatical, especially at both Brigit's Garden and Glendalough in Ireland, and during my pilgrimage around the island of Iona, Scotland. And I'm serious when I tell you that I also experience that spiritual connection with sacredness at Angel Acres. That, by the way, is the name I call the property and home where I live north of town. Newell put it poetically this way: we must remind ourselves that "we are living in the cathedral of earth, sea, and sky."

Perhaps that helps explain my own spiritual connection with the study of geology. Perhaps you, too, somehow recognize a Sacred Presence when looking at and touching the structure, substance, and processes of the earth. And like so many people, perhaps you are one of those who find a deep sense of peace, as well as a sense of excitement and adventure when out in nature, or simply driving in the country.

The earth instinctively knows what it means to move in relationship with the universe. It's been doing that for 4.5 billion years. And this is where Newell diverges from some traditional Christian thought. He states:

We are not an exception to the cosmos. We are not an addendum. **Humanity has emerged from within the matter of the cosmos.** We express the nature of the universe. What is deepest in us – our longing for relationship – reveals a yearning that is within all things.

Yes, we may be a unique expression of that longing – just as everything else uniquely reveals some aspect of reality – but what we manifest is a yearning that emerges from the very heart of creation.

We find in the Gospel of John an understanding that **Jesus himself is the memory of what we have forgotten – that everything moves in relationship.** Newell explains, "Jesus comes to lead us not into a detachment from the earth or a separation from the other species and peoples of the world, but into a dance that will bring us back into relationship with all things... We want to touch again what is deepest in us and in our traditions and to reconnect with the One who is our source. For in touching the innermost strands of our being, we will be born anew."

Recognizing the sacredness in other people and in the earth itself, therefore, has profound implications in how we see and treat one another, and for how we relate to the resources and creatures of the earth. Our first step is to recognize the sacredness in all of creation. Perhaps the next step is to have the courage to protect that sacredness.

The spirituality embedded in the religious life of indigenous peoples throughout time and place have known this more fully than in what we call Western Christianity. So if we truly desire to connect with God, **we need to be born anew in way that leads us to reconnect with the earth.** I encourage you to look for ways to do so this week.

Amen

Resources:

John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2014

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care For Our Common Home, Encyclical Letter*, May 24, 2015.