

Stewardship: How do we care for God's Creation?  
In Celebration of Earth Day 2021  
Shared at Kairos on April 11, 2021



Reading 1 - *The Beatitudes*, Matthew 5:3-12

Reading 2 - *The Flood*, Genesis 9:8-17

Benediction - Tuesday Evening Prayer of Awareness from *Praying with the Earth* by John Phillip Newell, 2011

Communion has been on my mind because this Sunday after Easter when we hear the story of doubting Thomas is the anniversary of my first time receiving the sacrament. One of the songs I remember from that day is from St. Louis Jesuit Robert Dufford:

Sing to the Mountains, Sing to Sea,

raise your voices, lift your hearts.

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad.

I've gathered at Church to share the bread and wine, body and blood of Christ more than 600 times since then, but this year of physical and social distancing has taught me how to celebrate communion outside the Church, too. When I offer this song of my first communion aloud outside, in the presence of flowing currents, mounds of rocks, and chirpy birds I find myself praying not just *to* or *for* or *at* the mountains, but with them. Our collective presence raises prayers of joyful wonder to God. This song becomes a reminder of not only my first communion, but the ongoing commitment to being in relation with one another, in cosmic communion. I first heard the term cosmic communion from my catechism classes to describe the time when Christ comes again and God will be all in all. While we are waiting for this second coming, we can remember the covenant that God made with all living creatures after the Great Flood: to be good stewards who continuously build a new creation that strives for oneness with the earth.

When we come together for church each week to celebrate God's love, we recommit to the covenant. Through song, we rejoice with images of rainbows and blue skies and warm weather and as signs of Christ's resurrection, of reminders of the covenant with Noah from the second reading. But we also mourn places of brokenness when we light candles and lift up our prayers. We acknowledge the signs that perhaps the children of God are not actively participating in cosmic communion. In this past year, we witnessed devastating increases in hurricanes, fires, floods, snowstorms, that we can only expect to increase with increasing temperatures. God adamantly promises in the second reading to never destroy the earth again...so we are the ones who are causing these disasters that harm the earth. These signs from nature, the cry of the earth, illuminates blind spots where we are falling short in upholding our end of the covenant. In gathering for worship we practice listening for and noticing signs that God's covenant is still alive, and we find strength to work towards our vision of cosmic communion.

Of course, the church has not been perfect in exemplifying good stewardship. In the Genesis story of creation, Adam and Eve have dominion over the land, and these power dynamics have justified the exploitation

of resources that has had devastating consequences for the climate, ecosystems, and our shared livelihoods. These shortcomings though are not an excuse for the church to step away from creation care; rather, the universal church has a moral responsibility to rebuild the beloved community and dismantle systems that deny full participation in the covenant. In the first reading, we hear the Gospel message of the Beatitudes that can guide the church in caring for creation. When we live out these words of Christ, we build communion through our actions and become the Body of Christ. We sanctify these holy relationships with our neighbors and nature so that life itself is a sacrament, a physical sign of God's presence. The physical church becomes just one of many places where we can be in communion with God.

Praying together at the river and in the physical church provides spiritual sustenance in doing this work of caring for creation, participating in the covenant for a more just, loving world. I'm sure each of you have found sanctuaries in nature that remind you of God's unconditional love, the love that we are responsible for sharing with our neighbors. Painting is one of the places that I meditate on the need for cosmic communion in our world today. I started the composition for this painting, part of returning to water at the James River; painting outside helps me be attentive to signs that remind of God's covenant. I observe the wave crashing of the Z-dam on riverside drive, and I am reminded of both the Great Flood and the climate crisis and legacies of injustice we are now facing. Back in the studio, these observational studies become abstracted maps for learning how to be in right relationship with creation, to recognize my small part in communion with all living creatures. While working on this painting, I listened to a sermon from Dr. Fred Moten titled "This is How We Fellowship." His sermon describes gathering for worship as a participatory gathering in which we collectively seek to listen deeply for the needs of our neighbors. Dr. Moten emphasizes that fellowship is a verb, that who we are is defined by our actions, engaging in a process of call and response. Similarly, in cosmic communion we are actively seeking to be better stewards of creation. This practice requires careful listening, an openness to recommitting ourselves to the covenant each day. Through repetitive brushstrokes that respond to surrounding

forms, I bring theological reflections to the process of painting, which helps me remember that communion challenges us to be in solidarity with one another during these times of distance and division. I learn how to fellowship through painting.

The second reading acknowledges our yearnings for fellowship: “Blessed are those who hunger for Earth’s oneness, for they will be satisfied.” We are longing for oneness to gather again for worship, to be in the presence of one another once again. In these moments where we cannot fellowship in person, we continuously discern our unique role in building the new creation and take actions to live out the covenant. In doing so, our longings will be satisfied because we actively commit to co-creating a church and world grounded in right relationships. We will be satisfied because we take time to be in the presence of God’s wondrous creation, to be grateful for each new day. We will be satisfied because we see that caring for neighbor and caring for creation are inextricably linked; that the long work for healing wounds of injustice in our communities is deeply tied to being stewards who cultivate caring relationships with the earth, God, and one another. (pause)

This morning, I was listening to this weekend’s live-streamed church service, and what do you think the closing hymn was?

Sing to the mountains, sing to the sea. Raise your voices, lift your hearts.

For me, hearing this song from my first communion, this song that has also taught me to pray with the earth, is yet another sign of God’s presence in the world and a reminder that I am an active participant in this covenant with all of creation. This Earth Day, let us rejoice and be glad and prayerfully celebrate cosmic communion together. Amen.