

## Wilderness Time

I don't normally preach on Camp Sunday. The only other time I can remember doing it was on my first Camp Sunday with you all when I didn't really understand the tradition or know what to expect. So, I carefully prepared a sermon on the beauty of God's creation and our responsibility to it and came that morning ready to preach. As the songs and the skits and the testimonials went on and on, I began to wonder about the advisability of preaching at all but I had spent a lot of time on that sermon, darn it, and I was going to preach it in its entirety! I should have listened to my performer's instincts and not my preacher's pride. It was a disaster. We went way overtime – you knew it, I knew it, and the longer I preached the more uncomfortable I got and the more uncomfortable you got. I swore to myself I'd never preach on Camp Sunday again.

But as I prepared for this Sunday, I asked Brett and Jayne, since they were to be hosts and since they are among our most devoted fans of our camps, what they'd like to do. To my surprise, they suggested we abandon the old tradition of Fellowship Hall and the tents and the "campfire" and just do a normal service with appropriate songs and with an appropriate sermon from me. So, here we are.

Our Call to Worship from Psalm 24 and the few verses I read just now are all indicators of some pretty broad themes I want to touch on this morning. The underlying questions that these and some other passages address for us this morning are: Why do we make such a big deal about this every year? What is going to camp all about, anyway? Is it just because it is fun or are there deeper, theological reasons that we celebrate our outings to these places in a worship service? The answer to that last question is "yes," of course, and I'm going to spend the rest of our time before our monthly service of Communion explaining why I think so.

I'll start, as we did corporately, with that Psalm we used as a Call to Worship. I learned the first verse in its old King James Version wording when I was a child: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and they who dwell therein..." It is a good reminder to us of our place in the created order. Just like the trees and the flowers, just like the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, we are part of God's good creation and we, like them, belong to God. It's important to remember who the land and the sea and all that is in them belong to and it's not us. We are a welcome and beloved part of God's world but we are not the owners of this good earth. We do not have the right to destroy it.

Our Evergreen Association is having its annual meeting in Palo Alto, California, this October, the first time the meeting will be held outside the Seattle area. In part to help draw representatives from Seattle to the Bay Area, whose churches have been faithful about sending representatives our way each year, Rev. Dr. Patton has secured the services of Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. as our preacher for the weekend. Rev. Forbes has twice been named by *Ebony* magazine as "One of America's Greatest Black Preachers" and has also been recognized as one of the twelve "most effective preachers" in the English-speaking world by *Newsweek*. He is the former senior pastor of New York's Riverside Church, former professor of preaching at Union Theological Seminary, a radio host, and author. I'm certainly looking forward to hearing him in October.

I just finished his most recent book, [Whose Gospel? A Concise Guide to Progressive Protestantism](#), and he, too, touches on the theme of creation care and Psalm 24. He writes, "Only

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a criminal or someone mentally deranged would thoughtlessly walk into a stranger's home and eat through their cupboards leaving only crumbs behind, clog the sink with trash, uproot the ficus trees in the pot in the corner and leave the plant on the table, and run through a pack of cigarettes, filling the house with smoke. We consider it criminal to treat someone else's home in such a destructive manner... Not only is the creation good, as declared by God, but it also belongs to *God*, not us. How dare we treat as trash what is God's treasure?"

When we spend time in our beautiful Baptist camps here in Washington or in any other place in God's creation, we are called to see the beauty of our surroundings and respect God's work anew. The Scriptures also tell us that our role in creation is to be caretakers, gardeners, and stewards. Genesis 1:26 says: "Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."” Again, I want to cite James Forbes' recent book: "There is a difference between dominion and domination," he writes. "As ones created in God's image, we must care for creation as God does. But God does not waste, damage, squander, or pollute. God preserves, heals, conserves, and tends. Rather than seeing ourselves as mandated to exercise absolute power over other creatures and the earth, we need to recall and reclaim a notion of stewardship that entails responsibility, care, preservation, and maximization of what there is for the long haul."

I still think the most telling description of what our charge from God is *vis-à-vis* creation comes in Genesis 2. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." It's that phrase, "keep it," that I find important. It's the same verb as used in the great blessing that God commands Aaron and his priestly descendants to bless the people with: "May the Lord bless you and *keep* you." The tenderness, care, and love we would have God show to us is the same tenderness, love, and care we are to show to the earth and all creatures.

These are just some of the lessons we are to recall when we spend time at our Edenic places: Burton, Cascade Meadows, Bethel, or wherever we see the beauty of God's creation. Let's return now to the first of my brief readings to you this morning, from the Book of Leviticus (not, incidentally, a book I've plumbed much in my sermons for you). The passage concerns one of the great festivals of Jewish life, still observed by the children of Israel: the Festival (or Feast) of Sukkoth. A sukkot is a rough shelter built out of whatever is readily to hand and roofed with the still green branches of one or more of five types of tree. As the verses from Leviticus say, these booths are to represent the rough shelters built, broken down, transported, and rebuilt by the Hebrews during their long years of wandering in the desert before God allowed them to enter the Promised Land after the Exodus from Egypt. For one week every year, not long after harvest time, observant Jews are to live in these shacks in memory of God's providential mercy to them – that it was God that kept them safe, provided them with water and with food through the miracles of the manna, the quail, and rocks that gushed with water.

The custom is not far removed from that of previous Camp Sundays here at Good Shepherd when we set up tents in the Fellowship Hall and our children observed part of the worship service on sleeping bags in front of a faux campfire. It helps us to remember the spiritual richness of the times we've spent at camp, in tents or in rustic cabins, out in the woods away

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from the distractions of civilization, our modern fleshpots of Egypt. It may even direct our thoughts further back in our own national history, when we were newly come to various parts of this continent and lived always in cabins or even tents and God miraculously provided for our forebears. When we consider the blessings of the progress on this continent of our peripatetic ancestors, we, too, may say like the children of Israel, "My father was a wandering Aramean," or Irishman, or Swede, or what have you, and recall that only through the grace of God did that ancestor live long enough to sire children who would eventually give rise to us.

I would hope that, like the Israelites, we would be reminded, as we consider our dependence on God, that others are dependent on us to act as God's representatives of grace even now. If we turn back just a few pages in our Bibles, we find the command of Leviticus 19:33 & 34 regarding the treatment of immigrants, with or without documentation: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." Like the Hebrews, we were aliens in this land, most of us. Our long-ago fathers and mothers were welcomed by those who were native to this land and we returned their hospitality with slaughter. Now we have nearly all of what was theirs to enjoy freely and they have very, very little. We should remember that as we live in tents and remember God's grace to us. We should remember how, once Europeans gained control of this land, that they scorned other Europeans, Africans, Asians, and our cousins from south of the Rio Grande as they, too, sought to find their place here. May God have mercy on all immigrants and all of their descendants, especially the ones who have forgotten from whence they came.

To spend time in God's great outdoors reminds us of our place in creation. To take shelter in those beautiful places in our tents and cabins reminds us of how fragile our lives are, how we have relied on God's protection and how we are now called to protect others who are just getting started in our land. But another, perhaps more familiar value to our camps and camping experiences is how they enable us to leave our routines and familiar places behind and go to a place where we can experience God afresh. I read a verse from Mark's Gospel as an illustration of this idea but Jesus was hardly the first one recorded in the Scriptures to encounter God while away from home. There was Jacob, who saw that ladder we sang about while traveling away from home to his Uncle Laban's home. There was Moses, tending sheep when he came across the burning bush, up on the mountain to speak to God. There were Elijah and Elisha, away across the river from their friends when the younger prophet saw the older prophet swept up into heaven on a chariot of fire by God. And, in one of my favorite stories, Elijah some years before that, sent by God to Mount Horeb. "(The LORD) said (to Elijah), "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." Even in Elijah's day, it took getting away from ordinary life to experience the sheer silence in which we hear the voice of God.

Jesus, the Gospel According to Mark tells us, was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit after his baptism. Matthew and Luke use the gentler verb "led" but somehow I think Mark got it more correct. And while few if any of us will spend 40 days fasting at Cascade Meadows or any other

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place, we can all follow Jesus' other example of routinely going off by himself to pray. Each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) mentions him doing this. I suspect that all of us can understand why. Ordinary, day-to-day life can be so absorbing, so demanding of our physical, mental, psychic, emotional, spiritual strength, that a time of retreat, of prayer, seems understandable and necessary on a regular basis. We need the break in our routine to remember who we are, to remember who God is, to remember why we thirst after God, why we seek after God's face. We need that time of sheer silence, of remembering our blessings, of finding once again our place in creation.

We need, to put it another way, a time of communion with our Creator. Just as much as we need the symbols we call Communion on a regular basis, we need this other habit as well, this habit of going up the mountain or to a deserted place to open our hearts to God. Just as much as we need the bread of Christ's body and the wine of Christ's blood, we need the sheer silence experienced by Elijah, the opportunity like Moses to see the burning bush. Just as we need this time on the first Sunday of the month to eat together and drink together the elements of the Lord's Supper, we need that that time in cabins and tents to connect with the brothers and sisters who came before us and lived that way all the time and the brothers and sisters all over the world who still live that precariously and are still more aware than we of their utter dependence on God. Just as we need this time to look forward to the banquet that awaits us at the end of all things, symbolized for us in this hint of bread and whisper of wine, we need time to look back to when the earth was new and we hadn't yet spoiled God's good creation but still were faithful stewards. My sisters and my brothers, we need our time at those camps. We need our time alone with God. We need our time in the trees and the hills, in the valleys and the flowers, at the beach in the sea spray. For all these and for God's provision, thanks be to God. Amen.