

Resurrection and Wilderness

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This sermon was preached during Earth Week at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. It was during the Easter Season of the church, and the chosen texts were for Wilderness Sunday in the Season of Creation (www.seasonofcreation.com).

Joel 1:8-10, 17-20

Romans 8:18-27

Mark 1:1-15

This is the Easter season in the church year when we celebrate resurrection, life emerging from the grave, life out of death. We celebrate that through Jesus God overcame death and secured for humanity resurrection and life after death.

Resurrection. Life in the midst of death. Life after death. However, the idea of resurrection is not limited to life after death. Resurrection is also a metaphor and an analogy and a paradigm for the way God, the God of resurrection, works in the world. Wherever and whenever something of goodness and redemption arises, seemingly out of nothing, it is resurrection life. We learn the dynamics of death and resurrection from Jesus and we come to discern resurrection in many places where life appears in the midst of death and dearth. In Jesus, we discover that God is a God of resurrection, and if we but have eyes to see, resurrection happens in many places.

In the midst of death, resurrection explodes on the scene. In the midst of despair, suddenly there is a capacity for joy. A family is grieving the loss of a loved one, suddenly in the midst of grief, the family remembers and laughter is born. In the midst of war, seemingly out of nowhere, someone offers a gesture of peace. In the midst of failure and shame, from the blue comes grace and acceptance. In an atmosphere of racism and prejudice, unexpectedly, someone speaks a work of truth and an honoring of persons. Magic spawns in an empty hand. Spontaneity appears amidst rigidity. Order comes in the chaos. Life in the midst of death. Resurrection life.

A friend of mine, Tony Gittins, teaches Missiology and Cross-Cultural Studies at the Catholic Theological Union. He has worked in many parts of the globe, and he has ministered in an agency in Chicago that works with prostitutes. One day, after a conversation about some of these things, I asked him where he saw God at work. We happened to be walking along together at the time from CTU to a restaurant, and he pointed to the sidewalk. "There," he said, "You see the grass pushing up between the concrete slabs and the cracks in the sidewalk beneath us? That's where God works—pushing up through the margins, breaking through the places that cover God's work, at the edges where we least expect it." Yes, in the despair and in the grief and in the struggle and in the empty hand, suddenly life bursts forth. Life in the midst of death. Resurrection life.

Joe Sittler used to teach here at LSTC. He was a wonderfully creative theologian. I recall asking Joe a similar question. I was in one of my atheist periods, and I posed the question this way: “What are the signs that lead you to think that God exists?” It was shortly after the Three Mile Island disaster, the radiation leak at the nuclear plant in Pennsylvania that destroyed every sign of life for some area around it. Joe stopped in his tracks, put his hand on his chin as he was want to do, and after some reflection said, “Just five days after the leak at Three Mile Island, there were already flowers blooming right next to the nuclear facility. It is this incredible ‘urge to life,’” Joe said, “this impulse for life to emerge in the midst of the bleakest existence, *that* is the sign of God’s existence.” An urge to life in the midst of the bleakest desolation. Life in the midst of death. Resurrection life.

Wilderness is a place of desolation and bleakness. It is proverbially a place where life, particularly human existence, does not survive. It is desert. One of the most vivid metaphors of resurrection is the biblical image of “flowers blooming in the desert.” We know that when it does occasionally rain in the desert, in any desert, suddenly, overnight, flowers may appear everywhere—the most brilliant-colored flowers, like a miracle, in the desert, the very plants used as dyes for brightest, most colorful cloth.

In the desert of Judea in Palestine, next to the Dead Sea, where all around is lifeless, there is the most amazing scene. As we moved in the tour bus along the Dead Sea from Qumran south toward Masada, with the lifeless water to our left and the dry sands on our right, suddenly we came upon an area of thick foliage. It was En Gedi. We got out of the bus and scrambled upward on an open path through the trees and bushes and underbrush to the top of a small hill. On the hill was a spring of water, a spring in the wilderness, and a small pond of water. All around were bright flowers and the greenest foliage. People were lounging around and dipping in the pond for refreshment in the heat. The foliage was so thick that as we went on the path down to the road, we could not even see people ten yards away going on the way up. Flowers blooming in the desert. Life out of death. Resurrection life.

It is not incidental that the kingdom of God emerges from the wilderness. Israel emerged from the desert wilderness. Israel returned from exile through the desert to be revived by God. Life out of death. So also the kingdom of God emerged from wilderness. Wilderness is away from the kingdoms of the world, away from human civilizations. It is away from the evil and corruption of human communities. John calls people away from all that, into the wilderness, to repent. Jesus goes to the desert to resist the temptations of Satan. He faces the temptations simply to replicate the way the kingdoms of this world already are. He goes to the wilderness to re-imagine the world in God’s image. Instead tweaking the present system, Jesus is called to have a new vision, to be in touch with a God who is doing a new thing—away from poverty and marginalization, and hatred and revenge and greed, outside the face of empire, away from the gap between rich and poor, away from racism and marginalization, away from domination and oppression, away from uncleanness and illness. Jesus emerges from the wilderness with a startlingly new announcement: “the kingdom of *God* has arrived; turn around and invest your faith in *this* good news.” Flowers in the desert, life from death, the new thing God does emerging from the

wilderness. We ourselves need to go into the wilderness. We need the wilderness as a place to re-imagine the world.

But God is not just in the new life, not just in the resurrection, not just in the flowers in the desert. God is also in the death, in the desert itself, in the wilderness. Nothing escapes the presence of God or the presence of Christ. In fact, wilderness is not so bleak and lifeless as we have portrayed it. Wilderness represents areas of life where human life has not intruded, has not intruded to degrade or desecrate, to pollute or to diminish. Scientists say that ideally 50 percent of land in a region should be wilderness, untouched by human influence, if human life is to thrive. Wilderness, desert, has its own life, its own beauty, its own value apart from humans and apart from human use. Indeed, wilderness is called to worship God, along with the hills and the forests and the oceans. We humans need areas in which life can flourish without human interference, without human development, without human degradation—to support diversity of animal and plant species, to absorb carbon dioxide, to stabilize weather, to allow life to burgeon on its own. Wilderness. Wilderness. Wilderness life apart from humans shows us that creation is larger than human life. Wilderness has value in itself. Like resurrection, wilderness is unpredictable and outside the bounds. Learning this is to learn that this Earth does not exist for humans alone.

Nevertheless, we destroy the wilderness at our own human peril. Clayton Daughenbaugh of the Utah Wilderness society has argued that this is the original sin in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were told not to eat of the tree of life. They could eat from the rest of the garden, but not the tree of life. They could have some of creation but they needed to respect the fact that they did not have all of it. To leave some of creation pristine apart from human use and abuse was to know their place, to respect the limits of nature. To eat of the tree of life was to fail to have human limits, to forgo respecting nature's boundaries. *That* is the original sin! And we continue to violate it most everywhere today.

There is a movement in this country to preserve wilderness, protected from human interference and human development. Honoring and extending the Wilderness Act and preserving wilderness is our calling to “serve and to preserve” Earth. Preserving wilderness itself is a sign of life in the midst of death. An act of resurrection. When we preserve wilderness, we ourselves are agents of restoration, agents of resurrection. When we seek to restore wilderness and honor life for its own sake, we are “practicing resurrection.”

But there is another dynamic of wilderness and desert, a tragic dynamic that is moving in the other direction. It involves not the loss of wilderness but the spread of wilderness where human life depends on the land. Desertification, the loss of arable/grazing land to desert is one of the greatest threats to life on the planet today.

And the prophet Joel knows it well, knows it as the result of human injustice and of the failure to obey God

The fields are devastated / The ground mourns/ the wine dries up / the oil fails. The seed shrivels under the clods/ the grain has failed/ How the animals groan!/ the herds of cattle wander about because there is no pasture for them.

Desertification is one of the greatest most devastating expressions of environmental degradation we are facing—the loss of grazing/ arable land to desert. The threat of it is real in many places around the globe—Mexico and Brazil, Central Asia and China, Madagascar, and Africa—in Kenya and Ethiopia.

And what are the causes of this disaster? Some of it is due to overuse by those who live on the land to survive—overgrazing, the use of wood for fuel and heating, and the overproduction of the land. However, the greatest cause and the long term cause is global climate change, global warming. The climate change causes lower average rainfall. The heat dries and degrades the land. The warming dries up water sources. The warming causes wind storms that erode the topsoil. It is our actions, our lifestyle in the first world that is contributing significantly to desertification throughout the world.

And what are the consequences of desertification? The results are famine, drought, malnourishment, starvation, and disease. And the need to emigrate to other places where those who live off the land can survive—becoming environmental refugees. The very poor people who need wood for heat and cooking, who need water for life and irrigation, as means of short term survival are those who are most affected. Climate change affects most those who live off the land. And women bear the greatest consequences because usually they are responsible for their families—they must go further to find and gather wood, to do with less water and food, to care for their families as refugees.

So, what are the signs of resurrection? Where are the flowers in this desert? Where is life in the midst of this death? Who is practicing resurrection?

One sign of resurrection is the planting of trees. And one person who has been responsible for planting trees is Wangari Matthai. She is the Kenyan Nobel prize winner of 2004. Wangari Matthai established the Green Belt Movement in Africa and led the initiative to plant 20 to 30 million trees. Christian expressions of this movement are those churches that share communion and then go out from the assembly to plant trees. The trees are able to restore nutrients to the soil, to bring moisture to the area, and to provide fruit for food. Life in the midst of death. Practicing resurrection.

What might be another sign of resurrection? Another sign is technology. Some innovators have produced a solar ovens, simple boxes made of metal that can cook food during the sunlight hours without the need of wood for fuel. These solar ovens are now available for one dollar. These ovens are being distributed widely to retard the loss of vegetation for fuel. It also removes the need to scavenge for brush. You think this di not make a difference. To those who use them, they are life in the midst of death. Practicing resurrection.

And what about us? How can we practice resurrection? Places of desertification seem far away from us, and we ask, “How can I make a difference?” But we now know that everything is connected to everything else. If our lifestyle and actions contribute to global warming, our actions can also help relieve it and restore earth. Every time we act to stop our impact on Earth we are practicing resurrection. Rabbi Herbert Bronstein tells this story: Two people were in a boat. A person at one end of the boat began to drill a hole in the bottom of the boat. The other person said, “What are you doing drilling a hole in the boat?” And the one drilling the hole said, “Why should you care? It’s not your end of the boat?” That’s what we people in the first world are doing, drilling a hole in the boat. And the people in developing countries are sinking without being able to do anything about it. Meanwhile those of us in the first world are the people with life jackets and flares and life rafts.

If global warming is the greatest impact on desertification, then everything we do to stop our contribution to global warming is a spiritual discipline to practice resurrection. Every time we turn down heat. Every time we advocate for laws that reduce emissions. Every time we advocate for businesses and corporations to change their practices. Every time we change light bulbs. Every time we contribute to Lutheran Immigration Services. Every time we walk instead of drive. Every time we plant a tree, we contribute to bringing life out of death. We practice resurrection.

As Paul says, “All Creation is groaning in travail, awaiting the revelation of the children of God,” awaiting the revealing of human beings who will fulfill God’s mandate in Scripture to “serve and preserve” earth, humans who are called to be transformed by Jesus’ resurrection, who are called to discern resurrection in all of life, and who are themselves called to practice resurrection. “All creation is groaning in travail, awaiting the revealing of the children of God” . . . Are we among them?