

Sermon for September 3, 2017 (Creation1A) “Into the Woods”

(Based on Genesis 2:4-9 & Revelation 22:1-3)

“At the time that the Holy One, Blessed Be That One, created the first human, the Holy One took the human and had the human pass before all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and said: See my works, how fine and excellent they are! Now all that I created was created for you. Think about this and do not harm or desolate the world: for if you harm it, there will be none to fix it after you.” (Midrash Koheleth Rabbah).

The forest is our Genesis and our Revelation, heady metaphor and actual home. Three-thousand-year-old olive groves and thickets of fast-growing figs, the palm and sycamore trees that line the streets of Jerusalem, the massive cedars and sequoias of the Western Old Growth, the Amazonian Jungle with its rank, fertile lushness, the Great North Woods, with their acorn-heavy oaks and shining pines, the gnarled apple orchards Willow Schwarz helped a team of volunteers restore...all echo that garden, that first and last place, that restored and flourishing ecosystem where we belong.

Yet what has become of the garden? While Texas deals with the soggy destruction of 52 inches of rain, and Bangladesh suffers through the worst floods in 40 years, with over a thousand dead, the forests of North America's western states and provinces are filled with with smoke and scorched by fire.

As of last night, there were 948 active fires, with over 7 million acres burned. Because I failed to grasp such enormity, I looked down the list until I found places I knew...and found a fire burning just miles from the town of Manson, an orchard town on the edge of Lake Chelan, where I lived and preached for a summer, and led vacation Bible school for the children of the migrant workers in the cherry orchards.

I thought, NO! NOT THOSE TREES...and there are creatures who share that cry for every one of the 7 million acres already burned. I know there are people working hard against these fires—a college friend used to be a smoke jumper, and I remember her stories of exhaustion and jubilation in that intensely hard work—yet every charred acre of ash and ember and smoke challenges me to consider my own responsibilities:

Do I buy the whitest paper and casually toss it away? Do I open, and then crush, the cardboard box with no regard for the trees that died to shape it? Do I throw a stick of wood in the fire and enjoy the warmth without once giving thanks for the beautiful, sacrificial gift of the life cut down so I could have this heat? Do I *own* my part in the cutting down of trees on my land and others' land, for the sake of the structures I crave and my casual habits of consumption?

The forest is an entire ecosystem of constant sacrifice and redemption. It calls us, beckons us back into relationship with Creation—and our Creator. One of my wise teachers in this was Albert White. This man, who had built his working life around aviation and soared the heavens, spent his last few years profoundly grounded by illness and limitation. And one of the sources of joy for him became the daily act of watching the neighborhood wildlife: barn cats and porcupines, songbirds and raptors and crows, and most of all the fascinating fringe of the forest edge. There, just feet from his window, he witnessed so much life, and so many marvellous interactions, like the twin fawns that ventured close enough to show their dappled backs... his mindful act of hushed witness, and his deep thankfulness, completed the circuit of that beautiful gift. This daily practice of watchfulness and gratitude stitching him back, every day, into the blessed fabric of our shared earthly life.

Another recent teacher in this is Robin Wall Kimmerer, a research botanist, professor, and member of the Potawatomi tribe in Upstate New York. Dr. Kimmerer was drawn to botany by her sense of the world's beauty, and her desire to understand the power behind it. And that desire drew her to become an expert bryologist, an scholar of mosses. These ancient and most basic, primal plants have no vascular tissue, nothing that holds them up so they can grow toward the sun, yet they have survived and thrived for eons. Their soft feathery mats change the way air flows, the way water moves, the way a host of other creatures live and reproduce and carry on. They make it possible for trees to sprout and rise. They hold the moisture that lets fungi develop their massive networks at and below the forest floor. Yet she found that mosses depend on an unlikely source of help to ensure their own continuation.

Dr. Kimmerer knew that moss colonies can only spread at the rate of a few

centimeters a year, and their spores only travel from one water drop to another. So how had they spread through the northern forests? How had they showed up on the top of isolated boulders and the top of every fallen log? One of her first theories was that slugs might carry the spores from place to place, but—imagine this research project—the slugs she tested only transported spores a few inches away in their trails of slime. So she watched other interactions among the mosses, and one day it hit her: chipmunks. Chipmunks move mostly by short, scrambling runs and flying leaps. They land with impact and bounce up again, sticking to high points, avoiding low ground. Luring them into her research station with peanut butter, Robin Kimmerer checked the belly fur of chipmunks over the course of a season, and found almost all of them tangled with tiny fragments of moss. The places mosses tend to show up—alone on the top of rocks and stumps and logs—finally made sense. They were being carried there, and planted, by chipmunks.

This is how much every life matters. This is how much we depend on each other, even when you think your gifts are unwelcome. We depend on each other—even moss and mushroom, even chipmunk and slug—if we are to survive and help to heal this beautiful, fragile world we call home. “Pay attention,” say the woods. “We are all related, all beloved, all needed, all blessed.” The forest calls us back into Eden.

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