

New Scotland Presbyterian Church
Worship for the Season of Creation – Wilderness Sunday
(video link at <https://www.newsotlandpc.com/>)
September 20, 2020
The Rev. Holly S. Cameron

Prelude

Ryan Dwyer

“This Is My Father’s World”

Introduction

Welcome to worship at New Scotland Presbyterian Church. We are in the midst of four weeks celebrating the Season of Creation.

The flowers on the pulpit are given to the glory of God by the Dwyers. Thank you!

Call to Worship

We gather in the name of the triune God: our Creator, the fountain of life; our Christ, the pulse of life; and the Spirit, the breath of life. Our God is holy, and the whole earth is filled with God’s presence.

Hymn

Choir

“To Bless the Earth” #200 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

Opening Prayer

God of all glory, reveal yourself to us as we gather for worship, and show us your presence in all creation, quivering in the forests, vibrating in the land, pulsating in the wilderness, shimmering in the rivers. Help us to appreciate the wonders you have made: deep gorges and mountain ranges, thickets and rugged terrain, cactus and tumbleweed, forest and meadow, lakes and oceans, rocks and sands and hills. O Great Creator, we thank you for the wonders of this world and the gift of the wilds. We ask forgiveness for the ways we have mistreated your Earth, when we have seen it only as a collection of pieces for us to trample and trade, use and abuse, manipulate and manage, dominate and destroy. Forgive us, O God, when we live only for ourselves and apart from you. Help us to care for our earthly home, and make our hearts your home. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Words of Assurance

Sisters and Brothers in Christ: the promise of scripture is that mercy and love surround us always. Our Creator cherishes us, heals us, and offers us the grace we need for new beginnings. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Epistle Lesson Romans 8:18-28

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains

until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Kids' Time

For those unable to see the video, the children's sermon is about Paul saying that we can know God through all the things God created, and even when things are not exactly the way we wish they would be, we have hope because God loves the world and works all things together for good. Now it's time to see the photos that remind us of God's love and hope and joy. {photos.}

Keep sending us your photos so we can share them in the coming weeks!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for all the wonderful things you made in this world, and thank you for loving us even when things are going wrong. Help us to listen for your Spirit and to share your love with all the trees, and plants, and animals, and people, because you love them all. Help us to love them, too. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Song

Choir

"A Wilderness Wandering People"

Gospel Lesson Mark 1:9-13

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Sermon

This is the second of our four weeks celebrating the Season of Creation. It is Wilderness Sunday. Wilderness is mentioned often in our scriptures, but as we read through the many stories of wilderness, we might notice that there is not a consistent definition in the Bible of what "wilderness" means. The Hebrew word "midbar" originally meant a place for herding.

And yet, when we think of some of the famous wilderness stories, like Moses and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, Elijah and Elisha in the wilderness, Hagar and Ishmael being sent out into the wilderness, Joseph's brothers abandoning him in the wilderness, and the story we just heard of Jesus in the wilderness – none of those stories conjure up a picture of a place for herding sheep. In these biblical stories

wilderness seems to be desolate and deserted, a place where humans would face harsh physical conditions with no access to food or water. Wilderness is a place beyond settled cities or villages, where people might have terrifying experiences because of the isolation from communal life. We have stories of bandits taking refuge in wilderness places, and often times the wilderness is thought to be inhabited by evil spirits – we heard that in today’s gospel, too – the wilderness is where Jesus is tempted by Satan.

Paradoxically, there are also scriptures that talk about the pastures, forests, and rivers of wilderness. John the Baptist performed baptisms in a river in the wilderness. There are stories of great longing to go back to a nomadic past where people were not burdened by the rules and customs of living in settled communities. There is that longing to “go back to the garden” – the first place of wilderness where humans had not yet made any imprint.

It’s a longing people still have.

One of the shows I’ve been watching during the pandemic is Ken Burns’ documentary, “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea.” It starts in the mid-1800’s with the story of John Muir, who was born in Scotland, the son of a Presbyterian minister. His upbringing was strict so that, by the time his family immigrated to Wisconsin when he was about 11, he had memorized $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament. He found a love for nature when he took his first botany class in college. A turning point came several years later when he was a supervisor in a wagon wheel factory: a tool he was using slipped and hit him in the right eye. He lost his sight and then his left eye sympathetically failed. He spent six weeks in a darkened room wondering if his sight would ever return. When it did, he said he “saw the world—and his purpose—in a new light.” He wrote, “God has to nearly kill us sometimes, to teach us lessons.” And he determined from that point on to be true to himself and follow his dream of “exploration and study of plants.”

He started walking and ended up making a journey of about 1,000 miles from Kentucky to Florida, then he spent some time in Cuba and New York before finally settling in California. He fell in love with Yosemite and built a cabin on the creek there, spending his days climbing mountains, hiking the canyons, scrambling down cliff faces to get a closer look at the waterfalls, whooping and howling at the vistas, jumping tirelessly from flower to flower. He became a tour guide for people who wanted to come and visit this great land. When Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him there a few years later, he offered Muir a teaching position at Harvard. Muir declined and wrote, “I never for a moment thought of giving up God’s big show for a mere professorship!”

It is said that John Muir believed there are two books that help us know about God: the Book of Scripture, and the Book of Nature. He wrote that nature came “straight from the hand of God, uncorrupted by civilization and domestication.”

That is another way we think about wilderness – as a place given by God, a place we long to go back to, away from human civilization. Wilderness can be a place that we to know God better, and know ourselves better. Wilderness can be a place for our health and well-being. When Yellowstone was designated as the first national park, the legislation said it was “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” Wilderness is not always a place of fear and trial; wilderness can be valuable to us.

And yet, the wilderness is not just for us.

Professor Alice Sinnott points out that the Bible has positive affirmations of the importance of wilderness, but not just for human education and recreation. She suggests that the wilderness places are a cry from the Earth itself to “leave me alone.” For the Earth, wilderness can be a place free from the encroachment of human civilization, beyond human development, past the presence of humans altogether, free to grow wild. She recalls the book of Job, how God answers Job’s questions by lifting up whole dimensions of creation beyond human involvement or understanding – God says things like: where were you, O mortal, when the foundations of the earth were made; can you move the stars around; can you create lightning or snow; can you make the grass grow; do you know the depths of the oceans. God created so much that is beyond our ability to experience or understand. It may be that our planet depends on a certain percentage of wilderness places, free to develop ecosystems beyond human influence.

We heard in the passage from Romans that the whole creation is groaning in labor pains, waiting for its own liberation. The whole creation is waiting for God’s children to be revealed for who they really are. We heard in the Genesis passage last week how the earth was cursed and became estranged from humans who were meant to be its caretakers. In Romans, Paul describes how creation continues to be in bondage. The hope for its freedom lies with the hope that God’s children will have freedom. Professor Sinnott says, God’s children will find their glory “being God’s agents in restoring divine justice to the whole created world: for ‘creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (v.21).”

The early Christians in Rome were living in difficult times – there was strife in their communities, they were living in fear as a scorned minority, there was a real possibility of violent death. When Paul talks about groaning, it is absolutely the right description of how they are feeling. But Paul reframes their fears. He says they are not the only ones who are suffering, the whole creation is groaning. However, it is not a groaning that precedes death, but a groaning of labor that precedes new life. Paul reassures them: This is not the end, but a new beginning for creation. Earth is not coming to an end but is being reborn.

We are living in difficult times now – there is strife in our communities and in our nation, we live in fear while the pandemic rages on. In addition, Sinnott says, we encounter ‘widespread destruction and exploitation of Earth’s resources, the despoiling of irreplaceable habitats, the removal of indigenous peoples from their traditional lands, violence, and the fear of poverty, war, and numerous other tragedies.’ The media is in an endless cycle of reporting these difficulties to keep us in a perpetual state of anxiety and fear. When all we hear is how bad everything is, we can wonder if there is any word of hope.

That is what Paul gives us today. Paul hears the groans of the people he loves. Paul hears the groans of creation. Paul even hears the groans of the Spirit, in sighs too deep for words. And he says all this groaning is not a pathetic hopeless cry, not because the world is ending, rather the whole of creation is involved in one great act of giving birth, anticipating the day when our suffering will end and God’s creation will be healed and restored to life.

That is our hope. In hope we were saved. And in hope, we wait for the new life God is bringing forth, trusting that, with God, all things are working

together for good.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, you are the one who created all that we know, and you free us from false ways. We thank you for our traditions and rituals that remind us of your presence and your love, for the ways of prayer, the sacraments of baptism and communion, for our worship together, and our reading your scripture. We thank you for moments of grace, and for the awareness of times that we have been spared from danger.

In the midst of storms and distress, we open our hearts in sorrow, gratitude, and hope. We pray for those who have been spared nature's fury and those whose lives have been changed forever by ravages of fire, and wind, and water. We pray that all will find solace, sustenance, and strength in the days of devastation and recovery.

Hear our prayers, O God, for restoration that we may be closer to you; that we may be freed: from addictions and consumption, from lost purposes and loneliness, from domestic violence and global aggression, from economic and racial injustice, from worship of idols like body image, or success, or money, or time.

Help us, O God, to pray for one another, and then lead us to service. Grant us Your grace that we may respond in love, with kind and determined action, and with fervent prayer: mourning with those who have suffered loss, laboring with those who seek to rebuild, and aiding those who seek to survive and thrive through so many difficulties. Extend your loving kindness, mercy, and compassion upon all; and help us to reach out to others to show and share your great love. We pray in Jesus' name.

And we say the prayer he taught us:

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Hymn

Choir

"O God of Earth and Space" #274 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

Offering

The psalmist says "The world belongs to God; the earth and all its people." Our time here is like a day at the beach – we dig holes and build sand castles and create whole worlds that we cannot take home with us. God asks us to enjoy the gifts given to us and to share them for the benefit of everyone and everything that God has made. Let us return to God the offerings of our life and the gifts of the earth.

We give thanks for our many gifts. Churches depend on the generosity of members and friends to support their ministries. If you are able to mail in an offering, or give online at <https://www.newscotlandpc.com/>, we are grateful. If all you can do is offer prayers for the church, we love you for that gift. Whether it's money, time, attention, a phone call, a text, an e-mail, a smile, a decoration in your window or yard – there are so many ways we can reach out to others and know we are not alone. We are blessed to

be able to connect to one another and to love one another. Thank you for your generous giving!

Song of Praise

Ryan Dwyer

These are probably the most-sung lines in the last 300 years, so here are both the traditional words, and another variation:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, you heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures high and low;
Praise God, in Jesus full known:
Creator, Word, and Spirit one.

Announcements

- 1) We have a chicken & rib bbq coming up Thursday, October 8, take-out only. Orders are now being taken on our website www.newscotlandpc.com or by phoning the church office, 518-439-6454
- 2) We have all seen the devastating pictures of the wildfires in California and the Pacific Northwest. You might remember that our Administrator, Kat, came to us from that area, and she is an artist. Kat is selling some of her artwork as a fundraiser, the proceeds are for the United Way in Oregon. You can see the computer links for her fundraiser in our daily e-mail, or you can send a donation directly to:

United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley
455 Bliler Ave NE
Salem OR 97301

- 3) Presbyterian Disaster Assistance also helps areas in crisis, and has set up accounts to help recovery from recent hurricanes, fires, and the pandemic. You can donate online at <https://pda.pcusa.org/> or send a check to Presbyterian Church (USA) with the account code noted on your check. The code for Hurricane Sally is DR000169; for current wildfires DR000165, for Hurricane Laura DR000194, for Iowa derecho DR000015, for COVID-19 is DR000148:

Presbyterian Church (USA)
PO Box 643700
Pittsburgh PA 15264

Benediction and Blessing

Christ calls us to be his disciples, to serve him with love and compassion, to serve Earth by caring for creation, and spending time in wilderness places that bring us surprise and delight, awe and wonder.

And may the God of hope, who is above all and through all and in all, fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope, both this day and always. Amen.

Choral Benediction

Choir

May the good Lord bless and keep you, whether near or far away,
May you find that long awaited golden day today.
May your troubles all be small ones, and your fortunes ten times ten,
May the good Lord bless and keep you 'til we meet again.

Postlude

Ryan Dwyer

"This Is My Father's World"