

A Dwelling Place
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Scripture Text: John 14:1-14

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

That is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ: that in God’s house there is room for you and me. Indeed, the vast scope of scripture is witness throughout to this simple truth. For, as the opening words of the Hebrew scriptures attest, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. In the beginning, God created a dwelling place for you and me.

As the psalmist tells us, the heavens are full of the glory of God; and the earth is the Lord’s and all that is therein. As our *Brief Statement of Faith* reminds us, this small planet has been entrusted to our care, but, as that same *Brief Statement* also underscores, the inconvenient truth is that, by our lifestyles, “we threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.”

Alas, good planets are hard to come by, and this one seems likely to be the only one we’re going to get.

That simply reality, combined with the Biblical charge to be stewards of an earth that does not, in the first place, belong to us but, rather, belongs to God, calls forth from the faith community a deep commitment to care for creation.

We could begin to explore that commitment from just such a theological perspective, but the concreteness of “dwelling place,” calls forth, it seems to me, a more experiential perspective. Moreover, if God has prepared for us this dwelling place, it seems to me, we step into it trusting that it is good. The goodness of the earth shines forth in its beauty, and what better foundation for a theological commitment to creation care can we imagine than simple beauty? So, to begin, let’s share a few experiences of beauty.

What are the most beautiful things you’ve ever seen in all of creation?

My own list is so long that we would be here all day if I named them all. But, excluding my children and they awe and wonder they still inspire in me, if forced to name just one experience of incredible beauty I would likely recall standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon on a November morning so cloudy that the entire canyon was obscured, and watching as, over the course of a half hour or so, the wind gradually blew all of the clouds away and it seemed as if the canyon was being created before our very eyes.

I remember thinking, “If I ever won the lottery I would send everyone I know to this spot so that they could see what I’ve just seen.” It did not occur to me at the time that this was a profoundly theological response, but it was. The incredible beauty of creation is a pure gift. Nothing that I have done or ever will do or ever could do merits such a gift. God has prepared a dwelling place. Sometimes, when the sun strikes it just right, when I experience the majesty of it all, I am filled with gratitude and respond with generosity. I want to share that experience with those whom I love.

Of course, if I did that – if I won a lottery and sent each of you to see the Grand Canyon – imagine all the fossil fuels that would be burned up to make the trip. Indeed, when I saw the Canyon on the cloudy November day 20-some years ago, it was toward the end of that quintessential American experience: the long road trip. Three-and-a-half months, 10,000 miles, at least 400 gallons of gas, who-knows-how-many pounds of pollution pushed into the atmosphere by our circa 1977 AMC station wagon whose catalytic converter had been, if I remember correctly, carefully disabled by a prior owner.

One small part of my own complicity in the confession that we threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.

I do not bring this up in any way as an apology. In fact, if we could find the time, I'd do it again with the kids in a New York minute! Although, I think I be inclined to spend fewer nights sleeping on the ground, so we leave any even bigger carbon footprint than we did before. No, I do not bring this up to apologize, but rather to acknowledge what ought to be obvious: each of us is complicit in the common threat to creation, and the biggest culprit at the root of that complicity is our lifestyles.

Jesus did not say anything directly about environmental stewardship; the notion did not arise until, oh, about 20 centuries after his time. But he did have a lot to say about what we so breezily refer to as lifestyle, and we North Americans stand under the weight of judgment in the face of his words.

Indeed, even the enigmatic words of John's gospel carry that weight for us. If Jesus is the way – that is to say, if his very life is the way to relationship with God for us who would call ourselves people of the way, then it must follow that the way is a path of simplicity measured not by the height of our accumulated of goods but by the depth of our human relationships. The abundant life for which Jesus came, according to the passage just prior to our text for this morning, has nothing to do with overflowing assets and everything to do with overflowing faith. The reign of shalom for which the Prince of Peace gave his life has nothing to do with our relationship to money and stuff, and everything to do with living in right relationship with one another.

Therefore, if anyone in the world goes to sleep hungry tonight due in any part to my lifestyle, then I am not living in right relationship with my fellow creatures. And if anyone in the world today has trouble breathing the air where they live due in any part to the way that I live here in Arlington, then I am not living in right relationship with creation. And if anyone in the world goes to sleep tonight under a threat of violence due in any part to my lifestyle, then I am not living in right relationship with the Creator.

You see, any thorough-going theology of creation care is ultimately concerned with the care of our very souls. That is what's at stake here.

The good news, though, is that we are children of a loving God who desires to live in right relationship with us. While our souls are at stake, they are also at rest in the hands of a loving God. That fundamental conviction ought to give us the courage and the will to begin again our efforts to set our various relationships right. In other words, trusting God's grace we can engage in our various ministries of reconciliation, including reconciling ourselves and our lives to the reality of life on this small, blue planet.

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So, what can we do? Greater works than Jesus? Well, I'm not going to go down that road, so let's just say different works than Jesus. After all, he didn't have to worry about Styrofoam cups, and lead paint, and an oil-based economy. But we do, so, again, what can we do?

What are a few of the steps that you have taken to lessen your load on creation?

If you take a look around the church this morning you'll notice a whole bunch of new "Exit" signs. The first thing you may notice is that they all work! So we're both safer and up to code. Moreover, while you may not notice this at a glance, we're also a bit greener as well. The signs are all LED design that uses a fraction of the electricity of the ones they replaced. You may have also noticed the announcement inviting you to bring a mug to leave at church to cut down on our use of disposable cups for coffee time and other church events. Small steps toward lightening our load on the planet that supports us all.

We have thought about some larger steps – more energy-efficient windows, for example, but have not yet taken them because, frankly, they cost a lot of money. We've gone through the same sorts of calculations at home, and those larger steps remain in the planning phase, while some smaller ones remain untaken because they would require changes in the way we live.

I have also taken a few tentative steps into public policy advocacy, speaking out, in my role as your pastor, in opposition to the proposed coal-fired power plant in Wise County, Virginia. Living in right relationship with the planet and with our sisters and brothers on it, at this point, demands of us some other way to fuel our lives that does not depend upon removing the tops of the mountains to get to coal buried within them. When Jesus spoke of faith to move mountains, this was not what he had in mind. Still, I do not feel that I know nearly enough to be an effective advocate on the broader social, economic and environmental concerns that press in all around us these days.

So cost, lifestyle and ignorance are some of the things that stand in my way of taking bolder steps to care for creation.

What are some of the steps you've thought about, but not taken, and what's gotten in the way?

As I think about steps not taken, and what gets in the way, it seems that in my own life what mostly gets in the way is fear. I am afraid that I will not have enough if I take certain steps that might be costly. I leave that language vague purposefully, because I think it resonates with decisions in so many spheres of life. We are so afraid, so often, of so much in this world. Yet, looking around during the beautiful days of early spring, I cannot help but wondering again why am I so afraid? I live in a world of incredible abundance. Creation itself speaks confirms this most everywhere I look.

What would it take for me, for you, for us, to live lives unafraid?

It is, for me, in the end, a question of simple obedience and deep trust. Do I believe the good news of the gospel, that Jesus came that I might have life and have it abundantly or do I not? Am I willing, as was Peter, to step out of the boat – the constraints made mostly of my own imagination on a foundation formed of my own fearfulness – and trust that I will be upheld by the grace of God? That is to say, do I trust that foundational gift of life in a good creation enough to let go of the grasping and hoarding that threatens to destroy the gift itself?

We are bound together, all of us, in a web of creation such that the strands of my life and living reach out and touch those of every other one. Treating creation well while I am here means treating those others well, as well, and to the extent that I dishonor creation I wound my fellow creatures and dishonor our Creator. To do so rends the fabric of creation and tears asunder the fragile weave of shalom.

We have been given this place to dwell for but a little while. It is ours to enjoy while we live, but it does not, in the end, belong to us. The earth is the Lord's, and by God's gracious action it is ours to share and to dwell in. The least we can do as guests is to treat it well while we are here, for we are not alone. Amen.