

Redwoods Presbyterian Church

October 29, 2023
Rev. Douglas Olds preaching

Trustees of Attendant Grace: Stewards No Longer!

Bulletin Cover Quote:

"[Thy Kingdom Come] must always be read as an assertion based on the revealed present and pointing towards the genuine future, but not as an assertion pointing back from an anticipated future into the present." --Karl Rahner [3]

Old Testament reading: Genesis 1:26 - 2:15

Psalm Reading: 148

*Infancy found God's arms in another face, my deciduous northland.
Not yet the people's face of Christ.*

*woods, lakes, the snow, and breezes,
Still All presented their bottomless bounties for wonder
Not yet cisterns capped by adult privileging concrete*

*Bullfrogs sang me to sleep with muted tubas
While the daffy hilarity of loons
Mocked hasty dawn:
Await the palettes of grace, sleepyhead.*

*Hikes along Giant white pines and
A shallow stream, its currents braid through copper-colored stones plinking like gamelans
to reveal soul in motile physics—now
to reach coruscant turquoise, a lake,
My squinting, now ever less furtive
at ripples swaddled and tickled by the hovering breeze,
Expose the sunkist mirrors of midday.*

*Along sloshy bog banks stand
Formal elms, maples, and quaking aspens,
Signaling their semaphore to me: Awaken!
Sun-ovened pine needles and dank myrrh mushrooms, their whiff pry my nose to sense
the tingle when come the rains that tap tent flaps or drum bedroom windows,
Caressing my ears in the gush of life's fountains.*

*The crunch of autumn leaves by my unshoed feet, raked or let lay
Like the ground-belonging abundance of Mouldering apples to replenish the hearths of seasons.
These too God embraces*

Earth embodied in me.

*Endlessly inventive and precision-forged frosty miniatures.
non-pareils to whirl and dance in small flocks of entrance,
Such my delight at the individuated fly and then earth-collected dump of beauty
autographed by every single jeweled evanescent--
cameos in winter's complicit and disappearing matters, bringing*

*Spring!
Afternoons outside, lily-puffed majestics
cottony wads of cloud sailing on the breeze, ruffling my windbreaker and hair in their wake.
Inside the vivid blue dome where I lay prone
in head-brushing meadow grass and milkweed cushioned Reveries,
Experiencing the sky and wind coaxing the arts of awe's poignant intrigue*

*As they whisper that we are friends:
Embark into the sublime voyage of grace.*

*I Awake anew, To the other face of God,
Whistling its gentle breeze
from the child's enchanted sensory privilege,
Recalling us to wonder and gratitude boundless.
Ever filling us with gifts.*

I wrote this poem called, "A Michigan to My Lips" a half-decade ago. I wasn't trying to express nostalgia—an ache to be returned to a simpler time I called "home," but rather I was exploring an exercise of the poetic virtue of "recollection," which reworks memory in a way that reinterprets sensibilities to arrive not only at new expressive awareness but also new commitments. New alignments with what is expressed by God in nature. By poetry, I explore my attendance to grace: grace discerned as received and shaping my contexts, and its call to dispense grace's flow outward in the Golden Rule.

A now unjustly neglected 18th C enlightenment philosopher, JG Herder wrote,

"One sees in a poem not only, for instance, as the masses proclaim, the person's poetic talents; one also sees which senses and inclinations governed in her, by what paths and how he received images, how he ordered and adjusted them and the chaos of his impressions, the favorite sides of his heart, and likewise often the fates of his life, her adult or childish understanding, the staffs of his thinking and of her memory [which is the soul expressed]" [1]

Like Herder, I propose that the way to read the Book of Genesis is as a poem of the Book of Nature recollected, the Hebrew people's organizing the chaos of their impressions of life in harsh environments that came to discern a gracious and demanding deity. The Biblical poems, like the calls of nature and of our neighbors in need, call us to take up the commitment to serve—steward-- but also preserve, as trustees, our estate: what has been entrusted to us in our lives worthy of care and repair, what Jews call tikkun olam.

Today is Reformation Sunday which commemorates our denomination's recognition of the courage of Luther, Calvin, and others to reform the abuses of authoritarian hierarchy and return Christians to a more Christ-centered discipleship. On this church's Stewardship Sunday, there is no need to convince you of the urgency of our ecological crisis that calls us to reform our approach to nature, which Christianity has been calling "wise use stewardship" for some time without a lot of effect. One necessary reform I see is to reframe our embeddedness in nature with another expression from that of the *oikonomos* – the antiquated and tired idea of stewardship that "rules over a house" – to a term pointing to a gentling presence in our common estate that is bringing us forward into the whole cosmos.

I propose the more virtuous and reparative – healing – ethic of "trusteeship" that preserves the renewing essence of our earth home.

The OT and NT depict many stewards as self-interested figures who lack understanding of their estate's operation and beneficiaries. Instead, they often see themselves as supervisors, aiming for a seat at the master's table. This limited perspective contributes to human failure in sustaining God's natural estate. Instead, fallen Adam stewards to rule and skims his fee off the top without undue concern for the beneficiary. Stewards focus on self-gain, working for a master who ages, while trustees align with eternal beneficiaries. The trustee is embedded in Christ's enduring kingdom.

In our reading from Genesis this morning, we find the idea of God's grant of "dominion" in the relationship of Adam to other species, which inheres in his "naming rights" which is Adam applying his understanding of nature and how it functions to reveal the divine creator in the earth's renewing energies. This knowledge is not of form, and this is important, but in action. Not in the anticipation of death, for animals did not die in Eden--or at least were unaware--but in enduring kinesthetic liveliness that heals, renews, and sustains. Yet Adam, sent away, goes forth to cut down a lot of forests and dam a lot of rivers and slaughter a lot of animals to build his static and lifeless monuments to himself to try to realign his descendants and their instruments with the transcendence of God. This faulty faith becomes the monuments and institutions walled around us, separating us from nature and neighbor. We transform the living energies of creation into something gated, bricked, and inert and call it our temple, our offering, and we take hope in the faulty idea that as long as it is perceived by others as standing, this is the gospel preached and we are in God's grace and aligned with God's transcendent righteousness--that we ourselves have regained the garden by our own efforts.

The idolatrous ethics of "dominion" as "domination" began after a half-millennium of the early church to subordinate nature to human extractive and exploitative production processes. A coercive and instrumental view of creation emerged with medieval Christendom: "Imperial Christianity, Christian Nationalism put Christianity into the service of the state. It's an anti-doxology: The kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ has become the kingdom of the world, and we will reign forever." [2]

It is as if a misreading of Gen. 1:28—our post-Fall forgetting that the prime mover of both our birth and our destiny is a Trinity inside the perfect imaging of Jesus. As if the "dominating" form of "dominion" of nature has captivated the modern mind bent on economic growth devoted to temples, and, like a black hole, vacuumed up all the light of Gen. 1 creative and beautiful harmony of nature and Spirit—as well as of Gen. 2:15's clear directive to humanity to act as keepers and guarder's—trustees, not "subduers" in the

sense of wrestling--of this harmonious “garden” which outside of Eden are to become the watched and kept pastures for the sheep now and to come.

Right now, we’re failing in that shepherd’s duty. Issues like environmental racism and climate injustice show that we’re not living up to our role. Psalm 104 envisions the intentional and interdependent ecosystem of divine creation—with non-human species participants in its gracious provisioning network. Psalm 148 incorporates non-human species into the worshiping universe, recognizing their intrinsic—non-instrumental—value. Yet in their instrumental, material pursuits, humanity has brought on a mass die-off of wildlife since 1970 -- 60%-70% of fauna, fish, reptile, and bird numbers, around 1/40th of these species have been entirely extinguished. [4]

Humans treat the sky, the source of our common breath, like they do the oceans like they do plants and animals: as a non-vitalizing entity devoid of the Spirit’s action and energies, a site to dump the byproducts of consumerism. Like in Gen. 1’s poem, the sky is creation’s frontier in the Spirit; but now the sky is the site of the apocalypse of the decreation as greenhouse gases flow from the degrading imagers of God, their signal failure of trusteeship to allow the richness of God’s breathing creation to flow by the Spirit outward in place and onward through time. A morally unembedded economic system of material vanity absent the Golden Rule has replaced the spirit of energizing grace, assaulting nature and thereby our sensibilities, and we are coming to an apocalyptic awareness that our decreative force is descending from the sky like a boomerang.

As my poem recollects, the awareness of the sky is the entry of God into our contemplation. Ps. 19:1 “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Rev. 10:1 images divine messengers in cloud and rainbow (Cf. Ps. 104:3-4). Isaiah 34:4 and Rev. 6:14 ominously state that the heavens will be rolled up like a scroll, an image of the sky’s communication of God’s will in the cycles of divine messaging and providence. We live on the bread and word infused by the atmosphere.

Apocalypse (meaning “revealing” or “uncovering”) is coming down from the sky. Can any of us forget September 9, 2020? When there was an all-sky, still-born dawn like a sunset never escaped, an ominously burnt amber signal of something foul?? The sky-- the place we look to rainbows-- now assaulted by climate change-fueled wildfires and made a crucible of birdless--like before a hurricane—orange and strange fog, a pre-COVID "smaze" [a new word occasioned by that day]. I remember thinking that we were in the bizarre place of hoping the darkness would last so that we could breathe: because then the smoke would stay above the fog even though it prolong its veil to the sun.



source: <https://twitter.com/SFGate/status/1303710780307644416/photo/1>

We are so quickly diverted by political theater that we forget God's. We forget our duties to our youth and their mounting and justified lament regarding the health of the planet. And in this, on this Reformation Sunday, we make note of this week's upcoming Día de Muertos: Our grief, and the ways we move to reform it by sharing it in lament by being realistic about these apocalyptic signs.

In such a moment of apocalypse, we recall Rahner's quote: "[Thy Kingdom Come] must always be read as an assertion based on the revealed present and pointing towards the genuine future, but not as an assertion pointing back from an anticipated future into the present." What is real and not what is imagined. We must look to the beneficiaries actually arriving, the coming heirs, and not favor some imagined cohort, such as our and our friend's expectations. Trustees, themselves heirs, must not presume to await some future arrival of God's kingdom in technological fixes or Shiva dancing in a new planet for us. The Kingdom is here and now, and our duties, not to be neglected, are to eternity breathing on street corners and wildlands in the present moment.

Unconsidered combustion is disrupting the intended ecosystems imaged in Psalm 104, and the authentic and covenanted worship of God that is the full community of Creation imaged in Psalm 148. These oblige trustees to these species. We are turning their—and our--ecosystems into crucibles of fire, which scripture associates with divine displeasure, while God is variously portrayed in the OT delivering graciously from his storehouse of frost and snow to God's people, the sweltering peasants working under the shapeshifting whips of masters.

Trusteeship asserts that humans uniquely mirror God's image through rational understanding and emotional sympathy. Unlike stewards, who focus on future speculation, Trustees act immediately to care for their environment, not postponing solving problems of the present's creation to some future fix. They aim to shift our perception from dominating nature to harmoniously caring for it. Trustees understand that we're part of historical language groups reflecting our ancestors' awareness of nature, and our poets continue expanding our awareness of and emergence in nature's attendant grace. Everything of God's creation that enriches us—art, language, relationships, other species, beauty in landscapes—requires our dedicated care. Emulating Christ's virtues, they build meaningful relationships with nature and community, living out God's intended virtues for the greater good. By these, then, trustees display they are true heirs of creation, expressing reverence and mutual care guided by the Golden Rule. They focus on keeping the planet vibrant not just for our own vacations in the backcountry but for others here and to come, emphasizing the need to preserve its renewing energies, not just its physical forms. Zoos, museums, or arboretums are insufficient; Trustees ensure their entrusted estate remains vibrant, beautiful, and renewing.

Our virtues serve as the cornerstone for ethical action and effective environmental care. They demonstrate to onlookers our trustworthiness and dutiful commitment for God's Kingdom purposes. Virtuous trustees model the gospel. Virtues heal, while strategic ethics for instrumental purposes—what ethicists call consequentialism-- is inherently corrupting because exclusionary in its speculative logic for a favored end-- which may not be God's! Trustees address traumatizing existential despair by companionship our neighbors' and children's laments over a heating and degrading world.

Six key Christian virtues can help address the climate crisis and its impact on Earth:

1. I've already spoken of **Recollection**: Reflecting on God's work in your life and scripture fuels a hopeful future. This mindful remembrance lays the groundwork for spiritual growth, contrasting despair with gratitude to guide us toward hope. It identifies with grace received so to attend to it outside oneself, to then network and distribute grace.
2. **Hospitality**: Embodying the Golden Rule to our neighbors in other species and the future beneficiaries of nature's estate, hospitality promotes peace and condemns and rejects militarism as well as every other material vanity: most esp. the futile cycles of violence and insatiable needs for "security" that mobilizes the exploitation of resources and disrupts natural values as well as peace.
3. **Thrift** (John 6: 12b) in the use of fossil fuels to support the praxis of atmospheric trusteeship. Thrift is aligned with the virtue of prudence (Prov. 2:11).
4. **Patience**: Countering the haste of our carbon-driven society, patience champions slower, more sustainable options. A couple who drives a car from SF to LA emits ¼ the carbon than by flying, for about the same amount of travel time.
5. **Loyalty**: A deep connection to our immediate environment involves our kinesthetic understanding of the genius of our place—where God has settled us. Aesthetic values encourage sustainable care and spiritual growth. Loyalty emphasizes sensory experience over abstract speculation, advocating for a more sensitive, localized understanding of the world. Loyalty is to our planet on which we were created and which we learned the languages of our places. The earth is the site of life's beauties. Mars wants our death. The death of our bodies, certainly, but also of the sensibilities of our souls expressed by language which originated on the awareness of the earth and its renewing essences.
6. **Asceticism**: Self-restraint curbs materialistic desires and rejects the allure of fashion and power structures promising security, focusing instead on simplicity, sustainability, and living securely in God's superintending care.

In the apocalypse of global warming that signals a human economy out of whack, with misplaced values, a trustee's virtues become the Gospel—God's duty to sustain God's creation becomes our duty of spreading the grace that attends us, created us, sustains us, and ever rescues and renews us. We are responsible to do the same as our gifts and strengths allow.

We are heirs to the creation's eternal kingdom and so are responsible trustees for the here and now. It's not about our forms we think beautiful and admirable;

it's not about these fashions or institutions.

It's about finding our soul in Christ's caring for the Earth's vital energies and cycles today and preserving them, including by the repairing virtues that calm a rapacious and hasty society. Christ is committed to the logos richness in all its creative expression recognized in the gentling by Shalom, world without end.

May it be so for you and me.

[1] Johann Gottfried Herder, On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul, II, in Herder, Johann Gottfried. Philosophical Writings. Edited and translated by Michael N. Forster. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 218 (quote is abridged).

[2] Quote adapted from <https://twitter.com/BrianZahnd/status/1717133536904286629>

[3] Rahner, Karl 1966. "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," in Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, volume iv: More Recent Writings, translated by Kevin Smith. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 337.

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/30/humanity-wiped-out-animals-since-1970-major-report-finds>