Terra Divina

Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given June 23, 2024
The Nativity of St. John the Baptist, Luke 1:57-80

Today is the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. John is our church's patron saint, the forerunner to Jesus of Nazareth. He was an eccentric prophet and innovator, who lived in the wilderness until the time came for him to serve Israel publicly. I can see his imprint in our church. St. John's has always been ahead of its time in courage. We have been doing innovative liturgy for twenty-five years. We were among the first to call women as our rectors. We were among the first to affirm LGBTQ folks. We had a long ministry to people living with HIV/AIDS. We are exploring sustainable mission, having the courage to publicly name what churches everywhere are experiencing: that the old stories and traditions seem to resonate less with people than they used to, church attendance all over the country is mostly down.

Both John and Jesus were deeply steeped in the tradition of their ancestors, and they both reinvented it, brought it to life, in brand new ways. Absolutely critical to our patron saint's spiritual development, his ability to do this, was the fact that he spent his life in the wilderness until it was time for him to share what he had learned, as the gospel reading from today says. In fact I think John would be delighted to know we are celebrating his feast day outside!

Deep in our tradition is an imagination about the wilderness. The Hebrew word wilderness, *midbar*, is derived from the word *dabar,* to speak. The wilderness is always the place people go to hear the voice of God. Moses heard the voice of God in a burning bush in the wilderness. Jesus went to the wilderness for forty days, being ministered to by wild animals and tempted by the devil. So let's explore what the wilderness meant to them and could mean to us, today.

In the Hebrew creation story, God created the world in seven days. Listen to the order in which that story describes God creating the cosmos: First light. Then day and night. Then land and sea. Then plants and trees. Then sun and moon and stars. Then creatures of the sea and sky, the fish and the birds. Then animals and insects. And finally, at last, humans. I always assumed, growing up, that creating humans was the crowning achievement, the apex, of creation. The best came last, so to speak. But what if the order of creation doesn't mean that? What if humans are the youngest siblings of the Earth Family? What if trees and sun and fish and bears are our older siblings, creatures who can teach us much wisdom because they've been here longer? What if we go to the wilderness, not just to have an introverted listening-for-God experience, but to have an extroverted conversation with the natural world, the Wise, More-Than-Human Others who do not speak in our language, but who do have sentience and wisdom and a language of their own? What if *they can teach us?*

Take a minute to think about it. Have you ever learned anything from the natural world? Perhaps nothing comes immediately to mind. Most of us are perhaps not habituated to think along these lines. But I believe this

kind of paradigm shift is desperately needed today, in terms of how we see the Earth, and ourselves in it. It is desperately needed if we want to save our beloved Earth.

Thomas Berry was a Catholic priest who ultimately became a lover and student of the Earth, calling himself a "geologian." He said this:

> The divine communicates to us primarily through the language of the natural world. Not to hear the natural world is not to hear the divine.[1]

And,

> Our challenge is to create a new language, even a new sense of what it is to be human. It is to transcend not only national limitations, but even our species isolation, to enter into the larger community of living species.[2]

How can we learn to listen to the natural world? Our tradition includes an ancient Benedictine practice called *lectio divina*. How many of you have heard of it? For those less familiar, *lectio divina* is a four-step process of reading scripture in a contemplative and meditative way, to encounter God in it and rest in that encounter. First you read a very short section of scripture slowly and aloud, noticing what has energy for you. Then you think carefully about those words or phrases, considering them intellectually. Then you go deeper and begin to feel your heart's reactions to those words or phrases. Then you begin to have a deep inner dialogue

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[1] Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*
[2] Thomas Berry, "The Ecological Age," in *The Dream of the Earth*, 42.

with God about what has come up for you, going deeper and deeper, until finally you let it all go, and rest in the presence of God.

There is a new movement in this country called Wild Church, which St. John's has participated in, and its core practice is an adaptation of *lectio divina,* which is called *terra divina.* In *terra divina,* we deeply engage with nature, with the earth, in a conversational and reciprocal way, moving through the entire spectrum of our own capacities as humans – mind, heart, and soul. Wild Church has nicknamed this practice to "wander and wonder." Yesterday, St. John's co-sponsored a Wild Church service with University Lutheran Church of Hope at Hidden Falls Regional Park, and even though it was raining, we still had about ten people show up. We practiced *terra divina*, in order to commune deeply with the More-Than-Human Others who are our kin, and then shared our conversation with each other.

In the spirit of John the Baptist, that innovator from the wilderness, I want to invite us today to spend the rest of the sermon time practicing *terra divina* and sharing about it. So let me describe how to do it.

First: it is going to be short. Five minutes. When it's time to begin, set your watches.
Second: please feel free to wander a bit, and just like in *lectio divina* when you notice a word or phrase that captures your attention, look around you and see if you notice some creature in the natural world that appeals to you. A tree, a bird, a rock, a flower. For those of you who find walking a challenge, I encourage you to stay where you are and just observe something from where you sit. Some clover at your feet. It all counts.

Next: this part is important. Internally, imagine crossing a threshold. Don't forget this part. Imagine you are entering the house of the creature you are approaching. Ask permission to approach, and listen, internally, for your felt sense of yes or no. Now, let's say you picked a rock. I know rocks are not biologically alive. But to Indigenous people they are. So let's all suspend our judgment about what we scientifically understand and enter into a more poetic, prophetic, imaginative mode whose goal is relationship. Ask permission to approach.

Next: Seek to be in conversation with this creature in some way. Seek to move from your head, to your heart, to your body's intuition, and to the wordless vast energy of your soul. Listen and speak. Use the same part of you that understands what it means when a baby cries, or understands what a pet is feeling.

Finally: offer your thanks and return.

When you come back, we will share for a few minutes with each other, then conclude.

OK to recap:

(1) Wander to find a creature that appeals to you or that seems to be calling you.
(2) Ask permission to approach.
(3) Be in conversation – listen and share – with this creature. Focus on an extroverted and reciprocal communion with this Other.
(4) Offer thanks.
(5) Return in five minutes.

After the sermon, the congregation shared in small groups with one another what they had experienced. The following insights and experiences were shared with the whole group:

The buckthorn and humans are both invasive species – perhaps we can learn from each other.

I looked over a grassy area, and noticed that it's not just grass. I heard the weeds say, "I belong here." This is a metaphor for so much.

I also saw this plant, plantain—it said, "I have gifts for you, and I don't require your support or work to do that." There are gifts all around us that we are blind to, and there are ways nature wants to speak to us that we aren't hearing. (Plaintain, by the way, is a medicinal herb)

Letting go for new growth.

Resurrection always follows death, one way or another.

Stability and protection. The wisdom not to fight things we don't always need to fight, like a bug landing.

I felt the serenity and beauty of this place, and how nourishing that is compared to how terrible things are in the world outside.

I was looking at the clouds. They are unique and unrepeatable, and changing all the time, like human beings. They are way past my permission—they are up there doing their thing.

I was watching a tree branch waving in the breeze, and suddenly it felt like the tree was waving hello to me. Maybe that's what they are all doing—maybe things are saying hello to us, and we don't know it.

I hope this exercise sparks something in you that doesn't stop. I hope this exercise sparks in you, even in a tiny way, an imagination that the world is alive, and that you are part of it, not separate from it. I believe Jesus' command to love our neighbors should include our More-Than-Human neighbors. To love is to be in relationship with others. This was a creative step in that direction. May we grow in this love, in this relationship with the Wild Earth. Amen.