

Reconnecting with the Beginning
Genesis 1.1-2.4a; Psalm 46; Matthew 28.16-20
Pentecost +1A
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Remember waaaaaayyyyy back to around five years ago—before binge-watching an entire series of a show was an option. Or maybe even years before DVR or TiVo were invented. We would watch an hour-long tv favorite and groan as we realized the episode would end with a cliff-hanger, and then we would wait an entire seven days, sometimes even three whole months, before knowing what happened next. The same feeling now is waiting for the next season to appear on Netflix. I recognize my sermons are not as addictive as *Breaking Bad* or *House of Cards*, but I do feel like I tossed out a bit of a cliff-hanger last week, and the episode after the cliff-hanger sometimes begins with a bit of a recap. So in case you've forgotten or if you weren't with us for the celebration of Pentecost, I'll remind you: as we spoke of the whirring sound of spirit breeze like the rushing of wind and the powerful spirit fire that changed the speaking and hearing of words, we turned to *The Rebirthing of God* by John Philip Newell and began exploring his book on "Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings."

On the day set aside as the birth of the church, I shared with you Newell's bold observation and prediction: "the walls of Western Christianity are collapsing...In another twenty-five years, much of the Western Christian household, as we have known it, will be no more. One only has to look around on a typical Sunday in most of our mainstream Christian churches. Who will be there in another quarter of a century?"¹

And recognizing that quote is jarring, at best, and terrifying at worst, I then reminded you: We will not be shattered by a question that requires us to wake up. We do not need to be afraid of a question. In fact, we are people who aspire to honor God by asking good questions. And we ask good questions here because they better enable us to seek justice, love neighbors, and welcome all. This is who we are.

The remainder of Newell's book explores the beautiful way forward as we "ask what is trying to be born that requires a radical reorientation of our vision. What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective

¹ John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp.ix-13)

soul of Christianity?" As people with the love-longings of God at the heart of our beings, how will we welcome the new thing that is trying to emerge within us? Some old ways are dying, yes, but what is of God will not die. What is of Christ will resurrect. And what is of Spirit will come rushing through these aisles and those city streets and our very souls each and every time we make ourselves ready for it. We want to be people who are tapped into the movement of God as new ways of being the household of God are emerging.

We're going to spend several weeks this summer exploring the ways of Reconnecting recommended by Newell—both recovering and discovering practices for faith formation. We'll leave the Pentecost red up through these months as a symbol and reminder of the spirit wind and fire that has a way of making things new over and over again. In the midst of these sermons, we will also begin our Summer Book Groups reading Richard Rohr's book *The Divine Dance* about the flow of Creator, Christ, Spirit (the mysterious three-in-one Trinity). Rohr explores the way humanity is invited to participate in that flow—the ongoing dance of God. Additionally, I have invited members of the Diaconate, Stewardship, Budget & Finance, Trustees, and our Mission Action Team to join me in the first of series of Long-Range Planning conversations on July 16 before we launch a broad Capital Campaign in late 2018 with the goal of establishing a St. Charles Legacy Fund to provide not just for immediate needs of our campus but will support the church that will exist here years from now. That's a lot for what we consider to be our lazy summer months. In my mind, this broad range of topics is all connected as one, big Pentecost conversation.

We are asking what is emerging in the Church universal, particularly in our Western context, and what is emerging here as a congregation at 7100 St. Charles Avenue. We are asking how our lives are intimately connected with the essence of God and God's ongoing movement. And the answers to those questions we are gathering about the movement of the Divine must inform the questions we are also asking about windows and plaster and asbestos and square footage and energy efficiency and our congregation's needs and the expansion of community partnership space-sharing at our address. This is not just my work to do. This is not just your work to do. This is the work of Spirit breathing and hovering and moving. This is the work of God speaking a new world into being. And the scripture before us today reminds us that we are invited into that work as partners together and partners with God.

In Genesis 1 and Matthew 28 we read a first commission and a great commission—paired together to help us recover something about ourselves. And in between is Psalm 46—though the earth may change, we will not fear. A good world breathed into being, a very good human pair made from the essence of that world who are then

blessed to work with God by caring for the good world God created. A resurrected Christ who has told his dearest friends not to cling to him now stands with them for the last time. He blesses them to continue his work by serving the world in the name of that swirling, dancing Trinity of Creator, Christ, and Spirit. These bookend blessings are guiding us still if we listen to them and welcome them as commissioning words for our lives today.

John Philip Newell notes, “The first thing that is said about humanity in the Hebrew Scriptures is that we are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). Everything else written about us in our scriptural inheritance needs to be read in light of this foundational truth: that within us is the likeness of the One from whom we have come. Or, as Julian of Norwich puts it, we are made ‘of God.’ We are made of the Light that was in the beginning. We are made of the Wisdom that fashioned the universe in its glory of interrelatedness. We are made of the Love that longs for oneness. This is not to deny our capacity for falseness and for the ugly betrayals that tear us apart. It is simply to say that deeper still is our of-Godness.”²

If we have fallen away from our of-God-ness, then we must reconnect with that first image and likeness, that first light and wisdom. Newell describes this first step of reconnection and rebirthing as “the desire to move back into relationship with everything that is of God.” There is quite a lot we have forgotten, and one of the great tragedies of the legacy we carry from Genesis 1 and 2 is that we have forgotten we humans are not the only ones made of God in that great origin poem. In fact, we have forgotten we are not even the first or second or third or fourth or fifth creation breathed of God in that story, and yet we humans—particularly people of faith who tend to cling to this origin story rather closely and sometimes even literally—we act as though it’s a story just about us and just for us. We must reconnect with the whole of what God created and remember that first commission to work with God to care for all of it. Because all of it has been breathed of God. And all of it has been called good. And because God invited us into partnership of earth-tending and creation-caring from the very beginning.

Listen to this fantastic observation by Newell: “Given the excessive orientation in our religious inheritance toward transcendence, we have tragically failed to protect the sacredness of the earth.” We have in our scripture thousands of blessings and invitations and calls and reminders to be right here in this world and this space and this life. We are pleaded with by prophets and saints to return to the beginning, remember what is of-God in us and of-God in the world. And yet over and over again we have

² Newell, p. 1

chosen to believe that the real life and the real action is far away and not yet, up there and in the sky. We haven't just failed to protect the sacredness of the earth, we have failed to notice its sacredness. We have failed to remember what is of God. We have searched for God and waited for God while overlooking fingerprints and breath trails in the world God called good.

That's why we still need old and new prophets calling out and inviting us back to the beginning again. Newell calls Thomas Berry "the first Christian prophet of the protection of the earth." Berry was a student of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the theologian and "Christian prophet of earth's sacredness." Berry expanded this sacred earth-seeing by calling "on us to [not just see it but] protect it...Earth was God's great work," Berry said, "and to serve in that great work is humanity's highest calling."

Maybe giving ourselves to transcendence is easier because believing our job is to politely wait for God to act surely doesn't require much of us. Believing the life to come is more important than the life God created here and now makes all of *this* hobby and filler. But Eugene Peterson has given us a great gift by working with the Hebrew poetry of Genesis 1 and playing around with the language. Hear the intent of holy partnership in these words:

God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them
reflecting our nature
So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,
And, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth."
God created human beings;
he created them godlike,
Reflecting God's nature.
He created them male and female.
God blessed them:
"Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!
Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth."

We have forgotten. We have forgotten the first blessing to be responsible for that which God created, and we have instead contributed to its destruction. We have not adequately created structures within our faith communities to honor the blessing of creation care, and now the needs of climate change and habitat destruction are critical enough that our call must be to the more radical work of earth justice. Likewise, we

have forgotten the commission Jesus gave to his dearest friends to do the work he was doing—to reach out to the vulnerable and cross the false boundaries that keep people apart, to tell the story of each and every person's of-God-ness, to mark and celebrate with the waters of baptism when our of-God-ness is remembered and rediscovered.

Jesus "is the memory of what we have forgotten," writes Newell. When we have forgotten, "that everything moves in relationship. He comes to lead us not into a detachment from the earth or a separation from the other species and peoples of the world, but into a dance that will bring us back into relationship with all things. He is pointing to what is deepest in the body of the earth and to what is deepest within each of us—the desire to move in harmony."³ And the blessings and invitations of these holy, ancient texts are still made new to us today as we recommit ourselves to the Jesus way as a people.

Yes, "We need to be aware of our failures. This is essential to the way forward. Equally important, we must be aware of our successes. When the Christian household gets it right—that is, when we embody our vision for justice, live our commitment to the poor, move in harmony with the earth—we can get it right like no other entity in the...world."

Friends, "We are being invited into a new humility, to serve the holy wisdom that is already stirring in the hearts of people everywhere, the growing awareness of earth's interrelatedness and sacredness."⁴ Our way forward begins by reconnecting to the beginning. May you rediscover the of-God-ness in you. May you rediscover the of-God-ness in others. May you rediscover the of-God-ness in the physical world around you. Be responsible for all of it. Take care of this world because it is of God. Love your neighbors because they are of God. As you go about your life in this world, invite every one you meet to remember that they are of God, too. And when you and I and those we meet start to wake up to that truth, then we celebrate that moment and welcome the fire and wind and dance of God to bless the whole lot of us again. May it be so right here with us. Amen.

³ Newell, p. 7

⁴ Newell, p. 13