

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Seasons of Creation Year A: Forest  
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There are moments in our lives, sometimes fleeting or seemingly nearly beyond our grasp, when we catch a glimpse of something beyond the ordinary, when everything lines up and everything seems right. We may describe these moments as “being in the flow”, or of a sense of wholeness or peace that overcomes us, or experiencing a surge of newness, or a spark of creativity, or a place of deep and holy nourishment, or stumbling into a thin place. These come to us by grace, for we can never orchestrate them, but only enter into them when they are revealed to us. While in these states, we are experiencing what this Forest Season of Creation is all about – that living place where nourishment abounds, where both birth and death happen, where the life-force is strong, where there is a sense of being held as part of a greater whole.

Last week at our spiritual retreat at Holy Cross Monastery, I invited us to identify these moments of “forest creation” in our lives, for you see, each Season of Creation, in my understanding, aligns with a Season of Spirituality. This season of creation, the forest, echoes the Garden of Eden, that descriptive metaphor which speaks of a time when all of creation, including humankind, was in balance and in right relationship with the will of God. I took my journal, found a quiet spot, surrounded by the trees, and began my own spiritual reflection. It was not difficult for me to identify many “forest” moments of my life. In fact, that part flowed so easily that my mind naturally began to gather those moments into spiritual categories, such as moments of healing, giving or receiving hospitality, my soul being captured through the beauty of music, shared love, or handing you the bread, the Body of Christ, and knowing deep within, that I was handing the Body of Christ to the Body of Christ, an incredibly transcendent moment.

But then something interesting happened. I began to associate the word atonement, which we understand as having something to do with Jesus’ death on the cross and our salvation, with a feeling of alignment and wholeness, at-one-ment, at-one-with-God-ment, as Richard Rohr, a contemporary theologian, would explain. And I realized that some of my most painful moments were also at-one-with-God-moments. That gave me a lot to think about as I recalled a close friend of mine, who held her daughter as she died, feeling that completeness of being close to Danielle and to God, in a profound and life-giving way. In the worst possible moment of her life, there was something being offered to her by God that didn’t make everything okay, but somehow made everything holy. This is how creation and the cross fit together today. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, all that we might understand as separate or broken or lost or tragic, is that, but not only that. For Jesus’ resurrection means that everything that ends has a new beginning built into it. Because Jesus experienced the full joy and pain of humankind, God sanctified both, and our salvation is our journey. This is God’s invitation to a place of “forest” creation, that alive place that holds both birth and death, joy and pain, and where there is a mutuality of shared love, hospitality, and a surge toward newness. It is this paradox of Christian faith that allows us to place within our liturgy the Prayers of People we will read at the 10 a.m. service, which are full of lightness and happiness and celebration of the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, with the Act of Remembrance after the violent act of the shooting in Las Vegas.

Our “forest” or creation experiences often do happen in the forests. One of my earliest childhood memories of sense the presence of God (although I didn’t talk about it that way then) was sitting in the tree in my backyard, for hours on end. I was a child who often sought solitude. The tree’s trunk had split, so there was a convenient, natural seat formed where the two trunks split from the main one, which seemed to be God’s invitation to sit awhile, be still and be aware of the presence of God. Maybe your “forest” experiences happen when you take walks in the woods, or as you drive Rt. 15 along the Susquehanna River and you see the brilliant yellow, gold, and red leaves shimmering against the river, and your breath is taken away. I think our forests can be a place for us to be inspired by God, to be invited by God deeper into God’s presence, to be healed by God as the wind through the branches seems to lift the heaviness in our hearts, all of which reconnects us to the metaphoric original state of wholeness, the Garden of Eden.

We can understand the relationship between our actual forests or our forest experiences elsewhere to our redemption through Jesus’ death and resurrection, because through them we are always invited back into the ongoing creative force of God, but our texts today draw us into a much broader context, where we can begin to see the relationship between our redemption and that of God’s created world.

In our text from Genesis we hear the account of creation which is chronologically after the one in which God created the world in seven days, but this one was written first. This was the original way the ancient Israelites reflected upon the world and imagined its beginning, told in a way that held their deepest values about the created world and our relationship with it. There are a few things that stand out in this passage: Humankind was made from the dust of the earth, out of which God created every other living thing. We are made from the same substance as the plants and the trees, and the animals who inhabit them. Humankind was not set above the rest of the created order, nor was humankind created in isolation from the rest of the created order, nor was earth a mere stage for human drama. Humankind was set in intimate relationship with its environment. The first “job” or vocation given to humankind was to care for God’s creation, even before humankind was instructed to “love God and love our neighbor”. Each time we work at restoring or caring for the earth, we are doing what God asks of us. Each time we pick up debris from the stream, each time we harvest the forests in sustainable ways, each time we raise organic crops, each time we attend to the amount of fertilizer we place upon our lawns, each time we plant native plants in our gardens, each time we find ways to bring back plant or animal diversity in our local area, we are doing what God asks of us, has asked of humankind from the beginning of time.

There are a lot of sad facts about our forests. There have been more forests cleared from 1850 to the present, nearly 170 years, than in all of previous history. Due to population growth and deforestation, the amount of forest cover available to each person has declined globally by 50% since 1960. One quarter of all the total animals will be lost in the next 40 years. I thought about this last year when they built that huge P&G Warehouse – where did all the animals who were living in those fields go? There are some very sad and scary facts about our changing earth, and they are important to us if we understand that God gave us the job to care for it.

And we can take inspiration from and hear an invitation to participate in the restoration of all of the created world, humankind and all else, all formed from the same matter, the dust of the earth, from our gospel today. It's the familiar story of Nicodemus, a rabbi, who feels a draw toward Jesus, without understanding why. He senses truth within Jesus and begs to understand, and Jesus seems to speak in riddles. What does "born again" mean? In John's gospel, this term does not refer to a "spiritual or individual" rebirth, but rather to a new way of living in the world here and now. This isn't eternal life that Jesus is referring to, as we might interpret it, meaning immortality in heaven, but rather as experiencing God's presence here and now—and then living into it. This is describing our atonement moments - our 'at-one-with-God-moments' which draw us back into the original creativity of God, our original vocation or job given to us by God of caring for the Earth, that life-force of God which continues to unfold in our lives and in the lives of all created beings. The job God gave us was to care for creation, so that means we need to work to be open to these at-one-ment moments, to move into the creative life-force of God, so that we can be active agents to support God's plan of salvation, for us and for all creation.

There's one story I'd like to tell you, that I believe puts this all together for us - the fact that we're made of the same matter as the rest of our created world, the fact that our first job is to care for our world (the plants, the animals, the forests, and the sea), the fact that because of the cross, Jesus sanctified us and all creation to be active participants of God's salvation plan for the world, which doesn't just include us, and the fact that our redemption means that new life can always come from what we believe to be endings.

Last month, Bill and I travelled to the Adirondacks, where I had the honor marrying two amazing people, Daniel and Kristin, whom I knew from a different part of my life. That invitation alone was pure joy, joining in a celebration where God is making something brand new, something whole and complete, out of what is already wonderful. A week or so before the wedding, Daniel reached out to me and asked if I would do "double duty". His cousin, aged 54, had died that past year, sadly carrying on the legacy of premature heart problems. Daniel asked if I would be there when they buried his ashes and say a prayer. Of course I would. That's a true and deep honor to meet people in their moments of deepest need. I arrived at the set time in the morning, travelling down a dirt road to reach the final destination, a family cabin on the lake, which had witnessed love born again and again, lives changed and shared, hopes grown, life experienced in its fullness. I wore my clergy collar, a pair of black jeans, and a warm sweater as cool air drifted off the lake. I met the mother of the son who died, as she held in her hands a seedling of a tree. My heart melted. We hugged, we shared, we know we could get through this together. We walked to the front of the cabin, looking at the water, encompassed by the living world around us - the trees of all shapes and sizes. The mother was carrying what appeared to me to be a seedling to plant on top of the ashes we would bury. This was not true. The container was one which held the ashes of her deceased son, settled in the bottom, so the seedling's roots could be settled around them and planted together. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Lots to think about. The whole family gathered to choose the right spot for the burial and the planting of this tree. They settled on a spot, which they had cleared so there would be enough light for the seedling to grow. When one of the men took the strong shovel, and pierced the earth, what appeared was a fibrous network of roots, strong and true, roots that were supporting the large giant trees nearby. All of the soil was rich compost, of an

earthy color, not like the dark brown seemingly manufactured compost we buy at Lowes. It was full of life's energy, yearning to create new life, full of priceless nourishment. The mother planted the seedling, tapped the soil around it so it would stay in place. Someone else had fashioned a cross out of splintered wood found nearby, and placed it purposefully and with reverence near the seedling. We held hands, said the Lord's Prayer, and felt renewed. I will never look at Ash Wednesday the same way again. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust has a new meaning to me, now having a visual to attach to what the redemption of us as people and the redemption of the created world looks like. God did not create us in isolation from the earth; God did not create the earth to be the stage for our drama. God created us to care for the earth and all its inhabitants. May we always grow in our understanding of how to do that, to live into those at-one-with-God moments, so that we may return to the ongoing life-force of creation within each one of us, which connects us to our Creator. Amen.