

“All That Is in It”

Psalm 24

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 16 July 2006

Imagine that you are a Jew living around the Sea of Galilee in the second century B.C. and you are singing this psalm...“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.” Now, you need to work hard to get into a different mindset. So, imagine yourself in that society as a tenant farmer who depends on the land to eke out a subsistence. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” And think of your connection to the land and all that it brings forth. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” And think about the fact that much of your land is not your own, but is controlled by a few wealthy landowners. “The earth is the Lord and all that is in it.”

And when you sing these words, you remember the words of the Torah: “The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD.”¹ And after seven sabbatical years, comes the year of Jubilee, when property is returned to its original owner, debts are erase, and slaves freed. According to the NOAB,² “These laws attempt to prevent economic exploitation by stressing that the ownership of the land is vested in God, rather than human beings.”

So, if you’re a landless peasant in Judea, this all sounds pretty good. You’re eventually going to get what is coming to you. After all, **you** are just as much God’s steward of the land as the person who now owns it.

We don’t know if the “Robin Hood” nature of Jubilee ever happened. Sometimes we have difficulty translating theory into practice. It is likely that those who controlled the land and the debt found ways to retain their assets. And yet, Jews in the second century B.C. had no illusions to whom all things and all people belonged. “The world is God’s and all that is in it.”



Now, fast forward if you will to the early eighteenth century in Europe. It is the Age of Reason, and one of the influential thinkers in British philosophy and government is John Locke. Now, you may think of John Locke as the hero of laissez-faire capitalism, but that is only partially true. Locke makes it very clear that he has read Psalm 24 and has been influenced by it. He sees God as the sole owner of the cosmos and all of us. Locke refers to God in saying that “...by his order and about his business, they are his property whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another’s pleasure: and being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature, there cannot be supposed any subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another’s uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for ours.”³

One commentator reflects that “In discussing the origin of private property Locke begins by noting that God gave the earth to all men in common. Thus there is a question about how private property comes to be. Locke finds it a serious difficulty.”⁴

¹ Lev. 25.1–4

² New Oxford Annotated Bible. (NY: Oxford, 1995).

³ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2005/entries/locke/>

⁴ *ibid.*

The fifth amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that we cannot “be deprived of life, liberty, or property [not happiness, mind you] without due process of law.” Those words echo Jefferson, and Jefferson echoes Locke. It’s also useful to remember that when the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights were written, most African-Americans in this country were considered property.



Too often, Christians and Jews have forgotten Psalm 24. We have seen the earth as something that is ours to exploit, rather than to preserve. We despoil air, water, land, plants, animals, and each other without regard for their true owner. Do we assume that Creation is here for us to abuse and consume or is our fundamental assumption that it’s here for us to sustain and nurture?

I think of this as a matter of stewardship at its core: conservation is all about using the gifts God has provided for us in a way that is sustainable and life-giving for **all** God’s people, including those in coming generations. When we fail to do that – through our personal choices, through our cultural norms, and through our governmental policies – we are committing a grievous sin, opening a chasm between God and humankind.

One of my favorite contemporary theologians is an eco-feminist named Sallie McFague who teaches at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She writes that “piety and praxis [or application] go together... Two things have stood out for me in the lives of ... extraordinary Christians: first, a profound relationship with God as the basis for their works of justice and mercy and, second, the growth of their love in ever-widening circles... Great praxis demands great piety... The Christian practice of radical love knows no bounds: it does not stop at any border, even the human one.”⁵

So, if we extend that idea further: that our radical love goes beyond the bounds of our species, we should be loving toward animals, plants, sky, sea, river, and the earth itself. That’s a little difficult to get your head around. Here’s another way of saying it: it is your duty and blessing as a Christian to love not only your neighbor as yourself, but also to love all aspects of God’s creation.

Meister Eckhart, the 13th-century German mystic writes that “God created all things in such a way that they are not outside himself, as ignorant people falsely imagine. Rather, all creatures flow outward, but nonetheless remain within God.”⁶ That’s taking it a step further, isn’t it? All creatures are not just God’s *belongings* or God’s *beloved*, but are actually **within** God.

That might be troubling to think about if you think of God as only being “out there” or “up there.” But, if you think of God as being *within us* and that we are contained *within God*, it provides a different way of conceiving of God. It eliminates the separation between humanity and God, creation and God, humanity and creation. All of us are *within God*, and God is *within us*.

Does that make it harder for you to think about damaging the planet? Perhaps it does, and you’re going to run off the recycling center down on Prospect Street right after you get home from church. If you do, that’s great, but I’m not saying this to be overly didactic. I just hope it helps provide you with an additional access point in your relationship with God and with the world we inhabit.

I’m going to take it one step further, using a metaphor developed by Sallie McFague. She invites us to see the universe itself **as the body of God**. (That takes it pretty far away from the wizened man with the long beard floating on a cloud, doesn’t it?) “Were

⁵ Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, p. 11

⁶ Quoted in Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 88.

we to speak of the universe as God's body," she writes, "it would not be this body or that body, but *all* the bodies that have ever been or ever will be, from quarks and exploding stars to microorganisms and centipedes, rocks, mountains, and water, but not forgetting tortoises, pine trees, buttercups, giraffes, and, of course, human beings in all their various shapes, conditions, and colors."⁷

Think about that for a minute: what if we began to think of the universe as God's body. That means that God is inescapable: there isn't anyplace where we can be absent from God's presence. What a wonderful, scary, comforting, awesome thought that is!

And if you were to start thinking of the universe as God's body, it means that if you throw trash on the front lawn, it isn't just throwing it on God's lawn, it's throwing it on God.

Sallie McFague writes further: "What if we were not only allowed but encouraged to love the earth? What if we saw the earth as part of the body of God, not as separate from God (who dwells elsewhere) but as the visible reality of the invisible God? What if we also saw this body as overlain by the body of the cosmic Christ, so that wherever we looked we would see bodies that are incorporated into the liberating, healing, inclusive love of God? Would we not then feel obliged to love the earth and all its many bodies?"⁸

So, go out and enjoy being in loving relationship with God's body: go for a hike and smell the sage, ride your bike and enjoy the sunshine, or just go into our front flower bed and smell the wonderful lavender that's growing there. I have a sense that developing loving connection to the planet will help build our faith, our relationship to God and one another.

God's body sustains your life; may you enjoy God's body and also help to sustain it so that all life may enjoy it for generations to come.

Amen.

⁷ McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 38

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 102.