

October 23, 2022 Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

John 1:1-5, Psalm 104:1-23, 31-34

"Orienteering as a Spiritual Discipline"

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Orienteering is a sport that requires skills using a map and compass to navigate from point to point in diverse and usually unfamiliar terrain while moving at speed.

When I was a Boy Scout there were lots of things I liked about being a scout. Hiking. Canoeing. Camping in all kinds of weather, even the Adirondack mountains in January. But I never liked orienteering. I could never get the hang of the compass and the map and all of the navigating. I was too busy enjoying the view, marveling at the mountains and the trees and the lakes, to keep track of which direction magnetic north was to be found.

Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggemann classifies the 104th psalm as a psalm of orientation. He writes that psalms of orientation paint a portrait of the world and our place in the world. They describe how the world functions and how we function best in the world. The 104th psalm is an excellent example of a psalm of orientation and in honor of this weekend's "Kirkin' of the Tartan Festival," an appropriate representation of Celtic spirituality.

The first theologian to shape Celtic Spirituality was Irenaeus who was a part of the early Johannine community, those that were taught by Saint John. During his time the idea that God created the world, *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, was gaining popularity. Irenaeus disagreed with this notion. He taught "that the universe is born out of the substance of God, not out of nothing" (Newell, p. 26) and therefore all of the world every molecule of existence is inherently sacred.

Psalm 104 and its eloquent wordplay speaks into this. We hear of God deeply present in every nook and cranny of creation. We hear of God making the clouds a divine chariot and riding on the wings of the wind. We hear of God creating mountains and valleys, springs and streams to quench the thirst of every animal. We hear of grass growing to feed the cattle and wine to gladden human hearts. We are told of a world intricately designed by the divine and saturated with the divine.

Critics of this theology have accused it of being pantheism, the worship of nature. They argue that it is being suggested we worship trees and mountains and other wonders of nature as gods. But it is in fact panentheism. Panentheism states not that all things in the world are God but that God is certainly present in all things.

So let me tell you, this is the kind of orienteering that is perfect for me and my poor compass skills. I do not need to struggle seeking out which way to turn to find myself before the sacred, before the presence of God. All the world is magnetic north. No matter what direction we turn we are face to face with God. We can never truly get lost from the divine. In the Jewish tradition Psalm 104 is sung on the morning of Yom Kippur as a declaration that no matter how lost we may believe we are we can always turn toward God.

The Celtic theologian Pelagius continued Irenaeus' work and taught that as we view all of creation as sacred and imbued with the divine, we too must be seen in the same light. He believed that the purpose of grace was not to lead us beyond who we are but to return us to who we truly are. In other words God created us in perfection, just as all creation was created in perfection. We too are a part of God's intricate design laid out in Psalm 104. We too are fashioned not from nothingness but of divine substance. We too are sacred. Our mistakes, our sinfulness, are not a reflection of who we are but rather represent the ways we have hidden ourselves from whom we truly are. Christ is leading us to be who we always were in the first place. As Dieter said in an excellent children's message this summer, if we want to hear God we can listen to the very beating of our hearts within us.

So what does this portrait of the world mean for our lives? This reality that God can be found in every element of existence; that all that surrounds us is sacred; that we too have the divine within us and are sacred? This vision shows us a world of far fewer boundaries and calls us to greater levels of awe and respect for everyone and everything around us.

When we realize that all of creation is imbued with the divine and that all of creation is interrelated and interdependent, how we relate to the world shifts. In Celtic spirituality my wellbeing is inherently linked to your wellbeing. The distinctions and boundaries we see of gender and race, economic class, nationality, and political persuasion often create an illusion for us that we are engaged in a win/lose game. But we are all fashioned from and by God and

there are only two ways the game can go. We either all win or all lose.

It is as if we are a finely tuned Swiss watch. If an element of the watch fails the entire watch can no longer do what it is supposed to do. It is as if all of creation, every person, animal, plant, and mountain were just one being. And if part of us is damaged all of us are damaged.

Sound a little too hippy dippy for some of you? Well, imagine if you were God and you had created all of the universe, you would certainly only see every element of creation as part of the greater whole. You would not play favorites and value one portion of creation over another.

Too hard to imagine yourself as God? How about as a painter that has painted a masterpiece? You would know that every brushstroke, every dab of paint, is essential to the greater whole. A masterpiece of art does not have greater and lesser elements. In fact, each individual element is meaningless without its purpose within the greater whole of the painting. Pull the Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile from the rest of her face and her knowing eyes, and you have nothing but an odd scrap.

Any time we think of our success coming in terms of others failure we have missed the mark. In the opening of the Gospel of John, the favorite gospel of Celtic spirituality, we are told that all things came into being through the Word, through Jesus Christ. Therefore, every element of existence was personally fashioned by Christ. The Celtic theologian Alexander John Scott said, "To truly understand is to find a unity." (Newell, p. 133)

So, we circle back to our orienteering metaphor once more. No matter how lost we may feel at times in our lives we are a mere opening of our eyes from finding God. The sacred surrounds us in everyone and everything. And it not only surrounds us, it lives within us; in the deepest recesses of who we are; in the way we were originally created. We are sacred, we are of God. This means that we not only have the gift of the Bible to reveal who God is but we have all of creation revealing who God is each and every day, by all that surrounds us and by what is within us.

All we need to do is to look and listen carefully and prayerfully with our eyes and our hearts and we will see the sacred presence of God, in the mountains and the valleys and the streams, in the wind and the clouds, in the trees and the birds,

and in the faces of each other. What a remarkable way to navigate the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Newell, John Philip, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*, HarperOne, New York, 2021.