

“Woliwoni”
Rev. Ruth Martz

Earth Day Sunday, April 23, 2017
Psalm 104; John 20:19-31

Black Elk, holy man of the Sioux Indians had a glorious vision:

“Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood, for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw the sacred hoop of my people was one of the many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center, grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy... But anywhere is the center of the world.”

Tragically, it was soon after Black Elk spoke these words, that the Battle at Wounded Knee took place and the final surrender of the remaining Indian tribes. But the powerful words of Native Americans like Black Elk and Chief Seattle, Joseph Bruchac and Scott Momaday, continue to call us to a renewed vision of our interconnectedness and the reverence with which we are to care for the earth and all its creatures. Black Elk saw *in a sacred manner the shape of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being.*

What a beautiful vision of the world, the universe as many hoops that make one holy circle with a mighty flowering center that shelters all people. The Spirit of God flowing through the universe, God as the fertile source and center as well the infinite circle that embraces everything and everyone as one being. You’ve all felt the sacredness of nature, both vast and intimate, when you’ve looked out to the horizon from a mountain top or skied down a slope, when you’ve looked up at a gushing waterfall or floated on the top of a gentle ocean wave, when you’ve spied a deer in the woods or seen a hummingbird at the feeder, when an inchworm has landed on your finger or you’ve gazed at the full moon.

Do you believe that all creation is shaped in the spirit?

Do you have faith in God’s promise of a new creation?

Do you believe in Jesus’ prayer and proclamation, *that they may all be one?*

My spirituality has been enriched by Native American prayers and writings, by my experience on the Navajo reservation in Monument Valley, Utah, and on a retreat with a deeply spiritual storyteller named Pika Di Tsaa. We can learn much from the stories of the Abenaki who first lived in our area; along with the children, you just heard an Abenaki story about people filling themselves with maple syrup instead of tending their fields and animals. Truly, so many self-serving activities can keep us from living fruitful lives as God’s people! Here in New Hampshire, the mountains, woods and lakes remind us every day of the sacredness of creation and our responsibility to care for the earth, air and water upon which all life depends.

I believe that the embodied and resurrected Christ reveals to us who we truly are as beings created in the image of God. Our very being is defined by the holy interplay of body, mind and spirit, within us and all around us. This is how Jesus approached his work of healing the whole person and restoring them to the community. And his teachings reveal a deep connection to the land in which he lived: the dust of the desert, the quiet of a mountain, the scattering of seed in a field, and the catching of fish in a lake. He pointed out how God cares and provides for the birds

of the air and the lilies of the field. He desired to gather the people of Jerusalem together, he said, *as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.*

Exuberant poetry and images are often our response to the divine glory displayed throughout nature. In the first two verses of Psalm 104, the grandeur of God is described through the imagery of clothing: *Bless the Lord, O my soul. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in the light as with a garment.* I picture a mountain wrapped in mist and the sun breaking through to shine on the glorious peak.

Ours is a dynamic God who moves with the forces of nature. *You make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.* The God of Israel is envisioned as creating a balance between spontaneity and order, abundance and restraint. The waters *ran to the place that you appointed for them... You make springs gush forth in the valleys.*

The psalmist also describes the universe as God's house. *You stretch out the heavens like a tent, you set the beams of your chambers on the waters.* The suggestion is that God's house is not limited to the Temple or the church or the human sphere. The vibrant universe is filled with God's presence. *You water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.* To serve God ultimately means to serve God's whole creation, with everything flowing and growing in relation to one another. As one scholar phrases it, the author of Psalm 104 shows us that theology and ecology are inseparable.

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We connect the risen Christ with the rebirth of nature and the symbols of spring, Easter lilies and butterflies, eggs at our Sunrise breakfast and the laughter of children hunting for eggs. I'll never forget my amazement and joy as a child early one Easter morning when I went outside and saw a rabbit hopping across and then standing very still in the bushes, the one and only time I saw one in our yard. You can't tell me that the Spirit of God wasn't somehow at work at just the right time! I stood there mesmerized, because in my child's mind, that bunny confirmed the truth of Jesus' resurrection. It was the holiest of moments. And yes, I guess that I did need to see in order to believe!

This morning we heard the powerful story of the risen Christ, one day somehow entering the locked room where the disciples were hiding, —and then the next day, inviting Thomas to touch his very physical wounds. The greatest mystery indeed of body, mind and spirit!

Jesus says: *Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.* And he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them, the breath of new life that empowers us to go out in spite of our fears and serve as Christ's disciples in the world. If you forgive someone, Jesus says, sins are released—and you are both free to live life anew. The author John tells us that he wrote this gospel so that through believing you might have life in Christ's name. Jesus said earlier: *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*

This is what Easter and Earth Day and every precious day are all about—the newness of life that God in Christ gives us and all creation, for eternity; our receiving and our sharing God’s gift of abundant, overflowing life. God promises us new beginnings no matter how hard life gets at times—and it surely does get tough. As we fight over land and water, resources and money, there is a great and deep need for every human heart to get back in touch with reverence for all life, along with repentance and forgiveness for what has destroyed life.

All creation is shaped in the Spirit, and God calls us to bring forth a new creation, so that we may all live as one in the Spirit.

In the Abenaki language, *woliwoni* means thank you. *Woliwoni*, people of faith, for every time that you *see in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they as they must live together like one being.*

Woliwoni for every time that you share this way of seeing and living with another person, showing reverence and gratitude, doing the hard work of forgiveness, allowing God’s Spirit to free you to serve as Christ to others. This includes honoring the sacred ground upon which we all walk, the sacred air we breathe, the sacred waters we drink, and the sacred bodies we feed.

Woliwoni to those of you who join marches, sign petitions and write letters to our leaders about protecting our environment, including land that is sacred to native peoples.

And every day let us remember to say *Woliwoni*, a simple thank you to God, Great Spirit, for breathing upon us the Spirit of love and hope, courage and new life through the risen Christ. Thanks for the glory of bunnies and lilies, butterflies and the birds of the air; thanks for this holy place of mountains and lakes that we call home.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. Hallelujah, sing praise to God! Amen.

NOTES

Roberts, Elizabeth and Elias Amidon, Eds. *Earth Prayers*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

Rowthorn, Anne. *Earth and All The Stars*. New World Library, CA

Information about the Abenaki Indians and their stories are available at various sites online.