

Land as Original Blessing

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Texts: Amos 4:6-8, Deuteronomy 11: 13-14

Good Morning First Church. I feel honored and blessed to be with you all today, and for the opportunity to bring a word that I pray will stimulate your minds and nourish your souls. God is always setting plans and working in our favor even when we may not realize it. This morning the spirit has moved me to remind you all that whatever challenges are going on in your lives that you will get through it. Remember to keep the faith, to keep moving forward and to welcome God into your days and every decision you make. Today I want to talk to you about the spiritual significance of Land in the Hebrew Bible but before I do that I want to verbally send forth healing, strength, wellness, joy through the assistance and power of the Holy Spirit, to nourish you in the ways that you require. Sometimes we can get so caught up in our day to day tasks, and stressors that we forget to look at the bigger picture, that we are loved and a small part of a larger divine mission. That God will carry us, and not forsake us. And that joy always comes in the morning. Have we remembered to laugh today? To smile, to breathe, to pray, to get out outside? To have time to just be. Sometimes it's the little things which can bring us back to the center. One of the greatest strengths God has given us is the gift of choice where we can decide to live life with a spiritual mind of patience, persistence and faith even in the face of our trials. When we make that decision God can will accompany us.

One of the solutions I just mentioned, which has been so important for me in my journey is reconnecting with God through **nature**. In Christian spaces I don't think we have heard enough about the sacredness of the natural world. In the current third series of call to return, we are discussing this theme of Spiritual Ecology and for those of you who haven't joined, I invite you to as your schedule allows!

When you all think of "Land" in the Hebrew bible, what comes to mind. The soon to be homeland of the Hebrew People? A territory that was and still is fought over through violent conflict. Or just a place. Or is it a Living breathing character with a personality, temperament, and certain qualities?

Ever since the beginning, the Land, the Earth itself was the original blessing. The first Gift from God to humans. But over time, this sacred relationship has faded. Our relationship to the planet has gone from a sacred one to one defined by exploitation and ownership regardless of the consequences.

The Torah describes the land of Israel as a place flowing with milk and honey. From this description and what we know about ancient Israelite society, they were an agrarian culture. As they migrated the Israelites gradually mastered the cultivation of the soil. The Talmud describes their predecessors as "well versed in the cultivation of the land", people were farmers, shepherds, conservationists. They prioritized a sustainable relationship with the land. During the transition period, the children of Israel, tended flocks.

Land was incredibly important in the ancient world, similar to how land is still seen in modern Indigenous cultures. It was not an object to be possessed or exploited, but it was a place where people formed deep ecological and spiritual relationships. The land was the source of health and wellness. It harbored the sacred sites and shrines of ancestors. It provided food. As much as the people stewarded the land, the land was the real steward of the people. Life was about living in a harmonious balanced relationship with the natural world, which was God's first blessing to our species. People could not live disconnected from nature. It was where people worshiped, lived, and died. Many people never traveled too far from the place they were born. So, the promised land to Israel not only represented a place where they could be at peace, and free from oppression, but it was also a part of them, a living divine blessing where people could provide a home and sustenance for themselves and future generations. This is a level of security they hadn't had in centuries.

When we go back all the way to the beginning of Genesis we see how important ecological relationships are. Adam's name translates in Hebrew to Red (earth) and forms the word Adamah which literally means earth or ground. This speaks to humankind's spiritual and physical connection to and dependence on the land.

In the story of Cain and Abel we see how important the relationship to land was. Cain was a farmer and Abel a shepherd. And when Cain murders Abel, his punishment was to be cursed from ever again having a good harvest, he was banished to nomadic life with no LAND to call home. NO land to farm, NO LAND to protect him. Essentially Cain was banished to a life with no ecological connection to a place which at that time was surely a death sentence. As he says in Genesis 4:14 "my punishment is greater than I can bear you have driven me today away from the GROUND (The ADAMAH), and from your face I shall be hidden."

Even though we might not think so, our Holy Scriptures, as well as many other traditions throughout the world, present a truth, that human beings were created to live in intimate relationship to the natural world. **When we don't not only do we suffer, but the land suffers as well....**

Let me explain that last statement. Which is the reality of how connected we actually are to the land.

The agricultural prosperity of Israel, was determined by what? The most important thing, rainfall. We see this in our scripture from Deuteronomy, in contrast to Egypt which was an irrigated society. This blessing, however, was threatened because in the Bible on the account of injustice, rainfall could be withheld, which led to drought and famine!!!

Deuteronomy 11:13-14 reads, so if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul— **14** then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil.

God is saying if you honor me and live justly, and righteously, treat people right, I will send you rain for your crops. I will give you LIFE.

This is very important for us to understand. Because furthermore, in the Bible there is a connection between social injustice and ecological issues. We also see this in First Kings 17 when God withholds rain from Israel because of idolatry and rampant corruption. As I mentioned before, this goes all the way back to the beginning in the Garden, there is an unbreakable symbiotic relationship between humans and the Adamah, the lands that they inhabit. In the scriptures, when droughts, famines, and pestilences came upon the land they often correlated with some profound social/political/or economic imbalance in the community. When people were being treated poorly, and neglected, or Israel had strayed from the values of love and justice, this imbalance was reflected in the condition of the land!!! Drought and famine weren't only because God was angry, it reflected a deeper spiritual and moral illness among the people!

Think about this, people were suffering from ecological issues thousands of years before the industrial revolution and the discovery of fossil fuels.

But now since those discoveries have happened, the land is suffering even more, add on top of that widening wealth gaps and mistreatment of vulnerable peoples. We really have some major challenges that we are facing today.

What does this mean for us in the 21st century? For us, the average person sitting in the pew. I don't need to start listing off the ecological challenges that we are facing. Many of us know and are aware of them. The purpose of my message is for us to reimagine the spiritual and physical connection between us and the Adamah, the natural world, which runs deeper than we can ever possibly imagine.

This also helps us to understand how traumatic it can be to forcibly remove people from their ancestral lands, the Adamah that has sustained them for generations. Whether that's indigenous peoples in Americas or Palestinians in the Mid-East. The ecological ethic in a society, usually reflects the social ethic on how people are treated. The condition of the land usually correlates with the condition of the people.

I believe that many of the ecological issues that we are facing are not only because we are burning fossil fuels, destroying ecosystems, and eroding agricultural lands, but also because we are treating human beings poorly. I think the same anger and frustration that God displayed during in our scriptures, is occurring now. Creation is groaning, because the children of the earth are too being forgotten. These eco issues reflect a greater ethical problem in the human family. They reflect how we treat **ALL LIFE ITSELF**.

If we are inseparable from the ADAMAH, it makes sense that when people are suffering due to destructive policies and systems, the Adamah suffers. Or when the Adamah suffers due to neglect and

pollution, we suffer. Physically, mentally, and spiritually. But we have isolated ourselves from the Earth so we're not aware of this. The vast majority of people have no understanding of her rhythms and systems. It's not just climate change, but it is an ethical crisis of the human spirit which is the greatest existential threat that we face. Because it is from the human spirit where all these other issues originate.

In the words of **Chief Luther Standing Bear, he said “The Old Lakota was wise. He knew that the man’s heart away from nature becomes hard; he knew that a lack of respect for growing, living things, soon leads to a lack of respect for humans too.”**

Therefore friends, I believe that we are living at a pivotal crossroads in human history. God is calling us to change how we understand God and relate to nature. Or maybe God is just calling us to remember what has always been so, but what we have long forgotten; that the planet itself, the Adama, must be at the center of our worship and relationship with the Divine.

History shows us that our ways of living are always subject to change. There will come a time when humanity must recognize that technology will not reverse the damage that has been done, instead God is calling us to return to more sustainable ways of living with nature. We will need to remember how to plant, to grow, to harvest. The ways of the future will center around regenerative agriculture, conservation, and sustainability. So, what can we do today? I encourage everyone to sit with these words, work towards reconnecting, reimagining your relationship with nature and God. **Remembering that life is about regeneration, what was once broken can be healed!** What conservation initiatives are happening locally that we can get involved with? It all starts with a change of heart, a change of perspective, and sometimes a single seed. Protecting the Adama and communing with nature is how we grow in deeper relationship with God. It is also how we can live the most enlightened and fulfilling lives possible.

To Quote Thomas Berry, *“What do you see when you look up at the night sky, at the blazing stars against the midnight heavens? What do you see when the dawn breaks over the eastern horizon? What are your thoughts in the fading days of summer as the birds depart on their southward journey, or in the autumn when the leaves turn brown and are blown away? What are your thoughts when you look out over the ocean in the evening? What do you see? Just a place, a thing, or the face of God?”*

Amen