

Reconstituting the World

April 23, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Lexi Boudreaux

Texts: Psalm 23

Good Morning on this Earth Sunday and Healing Sunday! Perhaps to your surprise, we heard this morning the 23rd Psalm from the King James Version of the Bible read with She/Her pronouns. A mix of tradition and newness- a combination of things that sparking hope in the midst of crisis often requires. This psalm is one of the most well-known portions of our sacred scripture. Many have been made to memorize these verses to stow away for some moment when we are in need of comfort and trust in God. I remember being led out into the hallway outside my Sunday school classroom to recite these words from memory and years later needing them as if my life depended on it, grateful for the little me who went through that exercise in tradition so long ago. My great grandmother embroidered these unforgettable words for me onto cloth and framed them so that I'd always have them nearby. For a while they hung in my childhood bedroom, for now their current home is in my office upstairs, in hope others might find the maroon and tawny letters encircled with flowers, beautiful and encouraging too. You are welcome to come see them anytime. This psalm is, at its core, a claim of trust. These are words meant to be called upon in a state of crisis. Words meant to be sung to instill hope in the midst of, as the psalmist describes, the valley of the shadow of death.

On this Earth Sunday it feels as if we have been walking through the valley of the shadow of death for some time now when we think about the climate crisis. So many of the metaphors we have in the Bible are rooted in images of nature: God's spirit hovering over the waters, the mustard seed, the still waters and green pastures that invite us to rest in God's presence and safety in this psalm. These days these symbols of comfort and refuge draw with them an uneasiness- an attention to the anticipatory grief of losing them

altogether. What do we do in the face of coming to terms with the destruction of the very images and places in which we have found the presence of the divine for thousands of years?

One of my oldest and dearest friends who I've known since elementary school is a climate activist based in Seattle, Washington. When she isn't engaged in advocacy, she works for a company that advises businesses in their efforts to become more environmentally sustainable. There was a period in our lives when she would proudly declare that her favorite topic to talk about was trash in all social situations: what we are doing with it, where it ends up, and how we solve the problem of having too much of it. Her heart for this work, this calling to care for the only home we have, has required a persistent, and evergreen hope in the practice of doing the right thing despite the outcome. This practice of radical hope has also invited her into making space for the complicated nature of the grief that comes with caring about the safety and future of the earth when climate change is real and already here. She has been a teacher of mine in this regard. I'm grateful to her for being both a person who is comfortable dwelling in persistent grief while at the same time being an optimist at her core. To fully engage with our relationship to our environment, the comfort it brings us, its fragility and its sacred nature, it does require us to trust and to grieve at the same time. To face the reality of all that will happen and to work towards solutions anyways.

She introduced me to the work of the *All We Can Save Project* established by Dr. Katharine K. Wilkinson, a couple of years ago. The movement was born out of a collection of essays, poetry, and art of 60 women who are leaders in environmental stewardship and climate activism. The collection holds the grief from the reality of what has been done to the world and suggests a different way forward in climate crisis leadership that in their words is, "more characteristically feminine and more faithfully

feminist, rooted in compassion, connection, creativity, and collaboration.”¹ The project rejects the intertwined siblings of patriarchy and racism, encouraging a broad base of leadership in this effort especially lifting up the voices of women and non-binary folks in the global south by empowering individuals to lead local dialogue circles to speak about the climate crisis and dream up solutions together.

They advocate for collaborative decision making and creating space for more voices at the tables that have long been dominated by and given power to those least affected by the consequences of climate change. A value of the project that is emphasized over and over again to me is that the way in which we do the work of justice is integral to the quality of the movement and its ability to create sustainable, lasting change that is rooted in liberation. Through this project what I’ve been learning is that the structures and modes by which we live out this calling of ours to love must be transformed into a different way of relating to one another, into a way of building power against this crisis, that is ultimately healing and equitable in and of itself too. This same notion could be applied to our lives more broadly or even how we carry out the work of ministry.

Ultimately, the project’s goal is to create a community that in their words, “honors that each one of us is a node of possibility for climate healing.”² Part of cultivating such a community is providing resources for individuals to lead their own circles to engage in deep dialogue about the climate crisis, hold space for the grief unfolding for our earthly home, and to come up with solutions to take actionable steps together piece by piece.

At the beginning of a circle’s journey, the words of this poem by Adrienne Rich are read in community. She writes:

¹ <https://www.allwecansave.earth/>

² Ibid

“My heart is moved by all I cannot save:

So much has been destroyed.

I have to cast my lot with those

Who age after age perversely

With no extraordinary power

Reconstitute the world.”

When it comes to grappling with the climate crisis whether we are overwhelmed by the latest U.N. climate report saying that we are running out of time to make a difference or whether we are fearful of the next natural disaster or grieving the destruction that came with the last, we are experiencing a state of collective grief. We might feel as if there is so much that we cannot save because some of it has already been lost. And yet, God is with us in this valley, as she was with our ancestors. Our faith tells us that it is possible to grieve and trust at the same time.

A partner in this work, Madeleine Jubilee Saito, an artist who produced a collection of poetic comics about climate change and the sacred, invites us into seeing the climate crisis as something that has to be approached by being in horizontal community with each other and by sharing in our grief so as to clear a way to see something else on the horizon for us all. She asks us, “Can you imagine the community that will heal the climate crisis? It will not be just you. It will not be a technological salvation. It will be all of us.” The words of the 23rd Psalm encourage us that we are not alone in the challenges of our lives that seem insurmountable. God’s presence is with us in our walking through the valley of a warming planet, of wildfires and hurricanes, of impending mass migration in search of water or to flee from it. If you, like me, read the headline of a New York Times email this morning “dead birds are falling from the sky” and your stomach dropped you might be feeling extra grateful to be in the midst of a community of faith that is holding this all together and not alone. In acknowledging all of this, in facing the

truth of climate change, we will fear no evil, for God is with us in this struggle. She lovingly sets the table, inviting us all to a feast of abundance that we can find in one another and in the spirit, even amidst our grief - leaning on the resources of our tradition and of our trust in God's promise of renewal and new life.

*Friends, we know that this wonderful world
is also a world of sorrow,
and that each of us bears a burden
that is sometimes too heavy to carry alone.
Today we wish to offer you
a time of blessing and consolation,
a time to renew your faith in God's promise
of wholeness and well-being for all people,
and indeed for all creation.
This is an opportunity to receive
A gentle word, a touch of soothing oil
and a reassuring hand—
all signs of God's gifts of peace and hope.*

*Some of you may wish
not to come forward during this time.
As you remain seated,
please enjoy the quiet and the music,
and pray for the world, for others,
and for yourselves.
Whether you remain seated or come forward,
whether you ask aloud
or silently within your hearts,
God knows your need,
and God comes to us all
with hope and healing and peace.*

Amen.