

God

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

17 September 2023

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Texts: Psalm 14

Genesis 1:1-27, 31

"God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."

~ Genesis 1:31a

Prayer**God of mystery beyond our grasp,****Be with us now as we pause to reflect on your Word. Amen.**

I remember distinctly the three weeks I spent deep in the Brazilian rainforest during the South American winter of 1994. The church I was attending in Rio organized a service/mission trip to the Amazon region where we lived with families of Italian, Polish and Russian-Brazilians who were lured to that remote part of the country by the promises of landownership and prosperity. But the same government that promoted their re-settlement in the 1970's also abandoned the small farmers on parcels of land that are neither good for agriculture nor right for cattle ranching. Most of the families subsisted almost entirely on the little they could extract from the forest and get from areas cleared for farming. When the pickup truck dropped me off at the tiny wooden house on stilts of my host family, the first thing I noticed was the glaring contrast between the thick lush green canopy of the trees that surrounded the clearing where the house was built and the extreme poverty of the people who, from day one, embraced me as one of their own.

For the next 20 days, I was stretched between the stunning delicate beauty and rich biodiversity of the rainforest and the difficult lives of the people with whom I lived and worshipped. Adjusting to a house without electricity and running water was not as tough as figuring out how to stay safe and healthy in the middle of the forest. It was wintertime, which meant that the days were hot, but the nights were very chilly. I had never seen or used an outhouse until then and every day I prayed that I would not have to go in the middle of the night. The family dogs kept most of the wild animals away, but there were snakes and spiders out there that could kill a grownup man. I learned quickly not to put on any cologne or use body wash. I made that mistake on my first morning and I became a magnet for insects of every size and kind that picked up my scent from miles away. Like the other men in the family, I bathed in a small pool of crystal-clear water near a small river a few feet from the house. I had been warned to look around before jumping in, but after a few days I stopped being cautious. One day, while I was enjoying my morning bath *au naturel*, I did not notice the small but very poisonous snake in the pool. When I finally saw it slowly swimming in my direction, I jumped out of the water and, instinctively, ran toward the house not realizing that I had left my towel behind. I was mortified, but, thanks be to

God, my host family thought the whole scene was so hilarious that they told the story to everyone at church later that day.

We went to church on Monday and Wednesday nights, and, on Sundays, there were services in the morning and evening. It took close to an hour on foot each way to get to the small church. During our walks to and from the services, we traversed a stretch of dense forest that kept the sky completely out of sight. It rained everyday around 2 in the afternoon, so the forest floor was always wet and muddy. At night, we carried flashlights to pierce the thick darkness of the forest and help us navigate the narrow road covered with sticky mud. The family and I huddled close together. There was no question that even the people who had grown up in the Amazon were very much aware of the dangers that lurked around. By the time I left, I had a serious case of Giardiasis or “beaver fever” that took several weeks to resolve. But, on those cold and dark nights, as we walked through the rainforest, we mostly chatted about life, told jokes, and, sometimes, sang hymns while taking turns holding the little kids who fell asleep trustingly in our arms.

Every now and again, we experience sacred moments that are too personal and unique and sacred to put into words. Once in a while, we all find ourselves in places and among people that change our lives forever. This is what happened during my time in the Amazon. I was changed. The community I lived with taught me that the unsullied goodness of God is not present only in the trees, birds, rivers, animals or in a sunset, but also in humankind. My host family and their neighbors were people of faith who, despite their very hard life, felt the nearness of God in ways that I had never felt until I lived with them. They went to church not to find God or to seek spiritual enlightenment, but to praise and worship the God whom they experienced in the midst of everyday life. Somehow, those people who were amongst the poorest of the poor – and I do not want in any way to romanticize poverty here – but, somehow, those people who I thought should be bitter and angry at life found a surplus of goodness in the world. Their faith in God gave them a lightness of heart that made it possible for them to believe that God loved them and was always present with them in their joys as well as in their struggles, in their laughter as well as in their tears, in their gratitude for the land and in their daily sweat to scrape a living in a rather unforgiving environment. It was the sacredness of the rainforest and the faith of the people who were somehow constantly thrilled at the goodness of creation that finally tilted my heart toward the call to the ministry. I cannot explain it but being close to the people in that tiny community tucked away in the Amazon moved me closer to this God-with-us whose creating power pulses deep in the body of the earth and whose image is imprinted in every human being.

During my first years in parish ministry, I used to think of each Sunday morning as a new opportunity for the congregation and I to be thrilled to worship God together. The words of Psalm 122 were on my lips before every worship service, “***I was glad when they said to me ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’***”¹ But a couple of months ago, while I was video-chatting with a friend of mine who joined the church on the same day I did and

took his first communion next to me, who was baptized in the same service I was baptized, and who is now a Presbyterian minister in Brazil, he noted in a very kind and caring manner that for some time now he has been hearing me speak about parish ministry with heavy-heartedness and disquietude rather than joy and excitement. I tried to justify myself by telling my friend that it is not easy to be a pastor in the U.S. these days. Churches are struggling. People are not showing up, volunteering, or giving as they once did. Going to church is not a priority for families anymore. Just about every place we turn to, we hear about dwindling congregations, the resistance of faith communities to change and adapt, and the seemingly inescapable societal march toward secularization that is creating what some call the great dechurching of America. At the same time, pastors are expected to be warm and fun at all times, the head cheerleader for the whole church, serve as CEO's but with no real authority to make important decisions, be skilled fundraisers and human resource managers, have unparalleled communication skills, inspire member engagement, attract new members, especially families with children, be excellent preachers that deliver the Gospel thoughtfully in condensed and non-controversial weekly installments, provide guidance during cultural polarization and organizational transitions without making anyone upset, be good counselors and effective community organizers, never get tired, defensive or discouraged, be visionary leaders who do not upset the applecart and hold everyone's doubts and questions while keeping the faith alive in the church. At the end of the day, you forget why you worked so faithfully to become a minister of Word and Sacrament and you begin to ask yourself if it's all worth it. My friend and I prayed together and then he reminded me of the words that Albert Schweitzer once said, ***"Sometimes our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us. If we had before us, those who have been a blessing to us, and could tell them about it, they would be amazed to learn what passed over from their life into ours."***²

The depth of the faith of those people in the Amazon was a blessing to me. I never had a chance to go back to tell them how their ability to celebrate the goodness of God even in such harsh circumstances blew the little light of my call into a bright flame. But I know that if I were to visit them with my family, Erik and I would not be welcome in their service. This is one of the reasons I am grateful for the United Church of Christ and our congregation – here the Christian faith comes with a beautiful wideness of heart that makes the church spacious and welcoming enough for every person that bears the likeness of the Creator.

Deep in my soul, I miss that simple and genuine joy of gathering on Sunday morning for no other reason but to be together in the presence of God. A few days ago, someone I know pointed out that churches in America have been trying to do calculus but the people in the pews have forgotten the basic arithmetic operations and that is, I suspect, why our collective light is slowly fading. We need both the depth of faith and the wideness of heart to live out the life-saving and world-transforming message of the Gospel, but setting aside a sacred moment to be in the same place at the same time to worship God has become a burden to many people in our society. In fact, nowadays it's much

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easier to skip church than to show up regularly, especially when the reason for our coming together is increasingly more nebulous and indistinct. And as your participation becomes less frequent and more sporadic, the flame of your faith begins to burn low, and you only realize it when the light is completely out and being together to worship God is no longer something that matters or is relevant to you anymore.

There are times when our light does go out; that's why we re-gather every week. We do need each other to remember why pausing to worship the God of life changes us. We need each other to keep the spark of faith in God burning in the church. We need to be around other people who can pass the depth of faith and the wideness of heart over from their lives into ours. This is by the way what we call making disciples. We need to be together to remember with deep gratitude those who came before us and blessed all of us with sacred stories that light the love of God within us. This is why I am preaching a sermon series this fall on the basics of our faith. We have to remember our why. Why we gather. Why it's worth it to worship God, follow Christ, and be part of a Christian community that blows the light of faith into a bright blue flame within human hearts.

The first chapter of the first book in the First Testament was written 2,500 years ago at a time when the faith of God's people had reached a critically low point. Christians around the world tend to assume that the story of creation we heard this morning was written at the beginning of time and was preserved over the centuries to give us a language to talk about how the earth and everything on it came into being. We forget that the people behind this passage were priests whose main concern was to inspire the congregation of Israel living in exile sometime in the 6th century BCE to remember why they should keep believing in God. Genesis 1 was never meant to be read as a fact-based, unbiased, historical, and scientific account of creation or as a Christian doctrine, as British biblical scholar Nahum Sarna said so eloquently, ***"The composers of Genesis were not creating doctrine, writing modern science, nor reporting history. The text does draw from the ancients' particular understanding of the cosmos, but it is not a scientific statement; it is a hymn of praise, a poetic confession of truth, a liturgy of wonder. To read it as a literal account of the events of creation or an omniscient grasp of the origins of life is to do violence to the text and mistake praise for history, poetry for science, liturgy for scientific analysis."***³

When the Babylonians invaded the Southern Kingdom of Judah, they destroyed the Temple, burned the King's palace, killed hundreds of Judeans, and took the king himself along with the religious elite and the brightest and strongest in the nation into exile. The nation ceased to exist and for both those who stayed behind in the occupied land and those who were frogmarched to Babylon, this was a monumental social, political, and theological crisis. Try to imagine how you would feel if the White House, the Supreme Court, the US Capitol, and the church were all razed to the ground and all of you became captives of a powerful nation that wanted to assimilate you into their culture and religion. The exile was a major national trauma for the Israelites. The people sent to Babylon were overcome by a profusion of negative emotions: hopelessness, displacement, impotence,

terror, shock and utter disbelief. They felt as if the gods of the Babylonians had more power than Yahweh. Inevitably, the people in exile began to be haunted by questions they never thought would cross their mind: Had God abandoned them? Did God forget the covenant with Abraham? Were the stories of the exodus, the Passover meal, the crossing of the Red Sea, the journey through the wilderness, and the conquest of Canaan all just a fantasy? Did God even care about their troubles? Should they continue to gather to worship this God that could not keep them safe? Was God perhaps angry with them? Did this God they worshipped even exist?

The priests knew the pain, doubts and apathy that were threatening to extinguish the light of faith in the Israelites' hearts. So, they wrote this brilliant theological poem, this evocative hymn of praise, this sophisticated story of beginnings, this elegant affirmation of faith to remind the exiles that the same God who created order, light, and life out of the formless void and darkness was with them in the chaos of history. Those priests were first and foremost people of deep faith, and they used their gift of storytelling to pour their faith out into the congregation of Israel. They made no attempt to prove that God exists. They assumed along with the psalmist that only the unwise would say that there is no God and somehow life and the universe are nothing more than a cosmic accident the likes of which seem hardly possible. What they did do was to tell the people that the God who was powerful enough to speak creation into existence, something unheard of among the gods of Babylon, got not only the whole world in God's hands but also their lives and their future.

You may have never thought of Genesis 1 in this way, but this passage is as much a story that affirms the inherent goodness of creation to people who were experiencing the world as a dark, violent, evil, hopeless, and even godless place as it is a moving gesture of pastoral care. The priestly writers of Genesis invited the exiles to open their eyes to God's self-giving through the gracious act of creating life, which they would be dead without. The priests urged God's people to contemplate the whole of creation with awe and wonder rather than fear or indifference. The priests reminded the doubtful, the skeptical and the wounded that they were not an afterthought in God's work of creation, but unique artistic creations that bore the image and likeness of the Creator. This was a revolutionary concept at the time because the priests were saying that while all creation is good, magnificent, and awe-inspiring only humans reflect something of the Creator and this awareness would have to change the way God's people saw and interacted with their human captors. More importantly, those ancient storytellers wanted the whole congregation of Israel not to forget that this God who creates, who filled the sky, sea and land with life is alone worthy of their time, energy and worship.

The late Frederick Buechner is one of the many Christian authors whose writing has rekindled the flame of my faith time and again. In one of his meditations, Buechner said that we bore God and ourselves to death with our theological chatter, trying to prove that God exists and define the divine nature. ***"Almost nothing that makes any real difference can be proved,"***⁴ Buechner said. ***"I can't prove the friendship of my friend. When I experience it, I don't need to prove it. When I don't experience it, no proof will do..."***

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[The] ***existence of God will never prove to unfaith that God exists.***⁵ In any case, ***“God cannot be expressed, only experienced.”***⁶

Friends, I won't bore you with my own chatter from the pulpit any longer, but I hope that you can take a good look around this sanctuary today and see each other as walking, breathing icons, people who reflect something of the Creator in our world. I pray that you will take some time today to marvel at God's beautiful creation and remember that God chose to create not because God is a show-off or an emotionally needy deity that couldn't bear to be alone in the universe, but out of love and a desire to be in relationship with us. May the awareness of the goodness of creation light the flame of your faith today. May you take a deep breath and know that the same wind of God that swept over the chaotic waters of creation is moving over this turbulent time for churches in America to create new life in our congregations. May you experience the presence of God today and keep the spark of faith alive in our church. Let us dare to blow the light of faith into a bright flame at Acton Congregational Church.

May Ralph Vaughn William's Old Hundredth remind you this morning why we are here and why gathering to worship God the Creator of the universe and Maker of humankind with joyful hearts still matters:

***“All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
him serve with fear,
his praise forth tell;
come ye before him and rejoice.”***

May it be so. Amen.

[Ok, church choir, take it from here]

¹ Psalm 122:1.

² My friend quoted Schweitzer in Portuguese. I found the English translation that comes from a short essay entitled *“Influence”* in Schweitzer's *Aus meiner Kindheit und Jugendzeit* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1924).

³ Quoted by Kathleen M. O'Connor in *Genesis 1-12A*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, p. 30.

⁴ Frederick Buechner in *Buechner 101: Essays, Excerpts, Sermons and Friends*, p. 51 [Kindle Edition].

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 54.