

SERMON

The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

July 15, 2018

Domini est terra

*The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.
the world and all who dwell therein.*

*For it is he who founded it upon the seas
and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep.*

Psalm 24

I can't get enough of being outdoors. It's July and the weather has been perfect for the past week, but it's more than that. There is something about being outdoors that is essential to being alive — rain or shine, hot or cold. Something about being outdoors revives, heals, makes one's glad and joyful— fully alive.

Years ago, I took a walk early one morning in the Cotswolds in England. The Cotswolds is an area in the South of England which include a range of rolling hills which rise from meadows — a rural landscape with stone-built villages, historic medieval towns and lush gardens. The name itself, "Cotswold" means —perhaps, "sheep enclosure in rolling hillsides." There are other interpretations that include references to early Celtic mythology. Whatever the name means, it is without question, a landscape of "Outstanding Natural Beauty."

I got up hours before my traveling companions feeling "driven into the wilderness" (as we've heard it expressed in the Gospels when Jesus went out into the desert for 40 days after his baptism, he was "driven to go out"). I was "driven" to get up and go out. In the Cotswolds, in August, there's an early morning clear, crisp chill in the air. I went out, not really caring if I could ever find my way back. I cut through old streets until I found fields, beautiful pastoral fields with stone hedges, paddocks created by walls made of stacked stones where sheep graze as far as the eye could see. I wandered. And there, not too far away was a small, round, white-washed structure with a dome. I found a gate through one of the stone hedges and went in. It was no more than 12-15 feet around. My heart was heavy those days with struggles that were going on back home, so in this private place, I prayed. I filled the space by singing the doxology in Lakota, simple sounds I earned on the reservation in South Dakota. The best praying I've every done comes like that—out of necessity— spontaneously from such a deep place that the words themselves are not important. No explanations. No requests. Just an outpouring from the heart. "You know it all, Lord," as our friend and priest, Jack Malpas used to say. That's the way he prayed, simply, "You know it all, Lord." I looked out the doorway and not too far off stood a man looking at me. He was dressed like a hunter, a sportsman, in a tweed coat and brown knickers. And he carried a rifle. I was startled but surprisingly, not afraid. I must have closed my

eyes for a minute because when I went out to look for him— I searched each hedgerow all around—he was nowhere to be seen. Yet I was overcome with an abiding sense that “everything was going to be alright.” My heart was light and my thoughts unburdened and I turned to go back to my friends. When I later shared this story with my Bishop, he said, “Oh, you were visited by an angel.” And I thought, “Of course! Angels in the Cotswolds wouldn’t be pretty little Christmas pageant angels. They would blend in with the landscape.”

Domini est terra

The Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.

Psalm 24

There’s a concept in theology —the study of God—that acknowledges the fullness of creation that allows for many layers— more than one reality to be concurrent —to be real at the same time. It’s called “the economy of God.” It’s a building block in the concept of Panentheism which means “God IN all things”, which is different from Pantheism which equates a sort of one on one, a singularity—like an animal seen AS God—like a particular panther, say, roaming the forest, identified as God himself. Rather, in Panentheism, God is IN creation and concurrently, we might see a tree and see the *glory of God* in that tree at the same time. The tree is still a tree.

And so the Cotswold hunter really can be a messenger of God and still be a man. The key is in *the glory*, the message itself— the experience of the message— of being healed, revived—the life-giving message and gift of God in creation itself.

Domini est terra

The Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.

Psalm 24

A quick word about the psalms. The word “Psalm” means “instrumental music.” But without the scores what we have in the 150 psalms of the Bible are the words that accompanied the music. Poetically speaking, psalms use parallelism as their literary device. Hebrew poetry is not about rhyming but is built on parallels. Parallels are two lines that express essentially the same idea. There are repeating parallels, antithetic parallels— which develop opposite ideas— and expansive parallels—which are an expansion on an idea. For instance—

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

(line two) *The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”*

This is the repletion of an idea. Here is an expansion —

*My mouth is filled with your praise
all the day with your lauding.*

Today's appointed psalm, 24, is a royal, ceremonial psalm. It is associated with the entrance of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem during the time of David. In today's First Lesson—

*David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord
with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and
tambourines and castanets and cymbals. (2 Samuel 6)*

It is a proclamation, a sweeping statement— that it is God who reigns *over all the earth*, in all its fullness. And it is a call to welcome the God who reigns *over all the earth*.

This week I met two angels, this time in the Centennial Memorial Gardens. Have you spent any time out there? It is an amazingly beautiful place. I water and pull weeds a few times a week. As the new trees and bushes and flowers receive water, I, too, experience healing and reviving and I breath a little deeper. I gave a tour of the Chapel and Centennial Gardens this past Monday to the executors of the TKF Foundation. Instead of expecting me to give them a pitch for funds, they sat with me in the garden. They told me that we are *Firesouls*. That the Chaplain's Peace Garden (which they helped to fund over a decade ago) and the creation of this new garden and gathering area are evidence that we share the vision of the healing power of God's creation. *Firesouls* are people who burn with the idea that access to nature can be a potent solution to some of the most intractable challenges we face in some of the toughest urban environments. They didn't ask for a grant proposal. They didn't ask for a persuasive pitch. They sat under the tree near the stones and the iron poppies and said, "What do you want? What can we do to help you?" I mumbled something about water and shade, irrigation and a covering. "Which do you think we need most?" I asked. They said, "Why don't you ask for both?" And when they left, I breathed a little deeper. I sat in the shade and read a book they gave us about their mission, their message.

On this occasion, as we get ready to celebrate the baptism of Iris Hope, the daughter and granddaughter of the Howie-McMullen family from this congregation who have dedicated their lives to the healing and revival of so many through medicine and nursing. I'd like to share with Iris Hope, her family, and all of you, the message that these angels shared with me. If you could see it written, it is laid out like a psalm.

*Walk gently on this earth; don't harm even
a leaf or blade of grass without
thought.*

*Drive gently on our roads. Your car and
your path are felled with beloved
people and creatures.*

*Speak gently, each word can build a dream
or break a heart.*

*Look gently on the whole creation, believing
it is filled with the Divine, sometimes
latent, sometimes in full glory, and
all of it was created for your pleasure
and benefit.*

*Enjoy life—to be happy at all times is a
tremendous accomplishment,
bringing you close to all mankind
and creator, and your true self.*

*Live gently, cradling your own life, nurturing
your own dreams, kissing your own
sorrows, whispering soothing words
to yourself.*

*Love gently, being sensitive to all you
encounter, knowing all is connected.*

*Rest gently...
Sweet life, sweet dreams.*

One last word. Do I really think angels exist? It seems that every culture around the world, and in every age, ancient and modern, people have spoken about angels and written about angels. I suppose objectivity lies in one direction, subjectivity in another, and experience lies somewhere in between. In my experience, we are surrounded.

Domini est terra

The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.

Psalm 24

Amen.