

Chapter One:

A Location and Invocation

based on

A Theology of Sanctuary

The Sanctuary:

We worship in a sanctuary that is wider than the walls of our church, a sanctuary called Earth.

According to Isaiah 6.3, the whole Earth is filled with God's glory, the visible presence of God pulsing through creation.

Invocation:

We enter this sanctuary to worship and invoke the name of this God, Creator, Christ and Spirit, whose presence fills our planet.

Sanctus:

We sing a *Sanctus* conscious of Earth as our sanctuary and God's glory/presence filling this sacred place.

Chapter One

Location and Invocation: A Theology of Sanctuary

Earth as Sanctuary

We need to begin, I believe, with a theology of sanctuary. We need to commence with a theology that focuses on worship if we are to change our orientation to this endangered planet called Earth. We need to be conscious of the sacred place where we worship, a sanctuary called Earth. A sanctuary is a sacred or holy place, a location where the presence of God or the Other is experienced, a domain safe for flora and fauna, including humans, and a spiritual home where worship can be enjoyed.

All creation is sacred. All that exists has emerged as an expression of God's word. All of nature is sustained by God's Spirit. The entire cosmos bears the design of God's Wisdom. Everything everywhere has been touched by God, the Creator.

All creation is sacred, but Earth is sacred in a special way. Earth is a sanctuary, a sanctuary chosen by God. This sanctuary is pulsating with God's presence and open for all to worship. It is in this sanctuary that we invoke the presence of our Creator. It is this sanctuary we enter to celebrate a Season of Creation.

There are traditions in the Scriptures that locate God in the heavens above, ruling from on high. In the famous prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple, he pleads that when God's people cry from the temple on Earth that bears God's name, God will hear 'in heaven, your dwelling place' (1 Kings 8.30). While some Psalmists view Zion at God's chosen 'resting place' (Ps. 132.14), others speak of God's throne as located in a celestial temple (Ps. 11.4).

There are other traditions, however, that reveal God's visible presence permeating creation and Earth in particular. A classic text is sung by the seraphs in the temple during Isaiah's spectacular vision:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord of hosts!
The whole Earth is full of God's glory.

The significance of these lines is often missed for several reasons. First, many of us sing a version of this sacred chorus when we sing the *Sanctus* in our worship. The version we sing, however, has 'heaven and Earth are full of your glory.' This liturgical version tends to distract us from the specific focus of Isaiah on Earth as a sanctuary filled with God's glory.

Second, we tend to equate glory with majesty, beauty and similar expressions of wonder. The refrain from Isaiah, however, has nothing to do with Earth being a wondrous or magnificent creation of God. This is an Earth text that reveals something amazing about the very character of Earth, a mystery we need to explore.

This reading describes something more than a vision of creation as grand, glorious and sacred. Earth is here a sanctuary filled with God's glory.

The Glory Presence

What is this 'glory' (*kabod*) of God that fills Earth? The glory first appears when the people of God are out in the wilderness (Exodus 16). They have escaped from Egypt but they are complaining because they face starvation in the wilderness. Then manna falls from heaven. To make sure the people get the message that this bread from above is from God and that they should stop complaining, God's shimmering glory emerges from the wilderness.

At this point we are told that the glory is enveloped in a cloud. The glory is clearly a visible presence of God, a mobile manifestation of God that all the people can see. Sometime later God's glory is visible on top of Mount Sinai. On this occasion it is described as a fierce fire (Exodus 24.17). Once again, the glory is enveloped by a cloud. This time Moses enters the glory cloud and resides there for 40 days. Moses is in the very presence of God.

Next, God's glory appears when the tabernacle had been completed and, as the text says, 'fills' the tabernacle (Exodus 40.34-38). God's glory is the visible presence of God filling the tabernacle. The cloud envelops the whole tabernacle and the visible presence of God dwells inside.

In the same way, the visible glory of God fills the holy of holies in the temple that Solomon built (1 Kings 8.1-11). The cloud is the evidence that God's presence, God's glowing glory, fills the temple, the same location where Isaiah had his vision.

A Sanctuary filled with Presence

What is the significance of these references to God's glory for interpreting the reading in Isaiah 6? According to this text, God's glory fills all of Earth!

The same technical terms for 'glory' and 'fill' used in the references above are here used in Isaiah 6.3. According to the chorus of seraphs, the Lord of the heavenly hosts may be holy, but where is the visible presence God to be seen? In all of Earth! All of Earth is filled with God's glory!

God's glory may have been seen in the past at certain times in certain sacred places on Earth, such as the tabernacle or the temple. This text, however, makes it clear that God's glory, God's presence, may be seen in all of Earth.

What then is the significance of this discovery? First of all it means that just as the tabernacle and the temple were sanctuaries of God's presence, Earth is also a sanctuary of God's glory, God's visible presence. God, it seems, has chosen Earth as one planet in the cosmos to fill with a sacred pulsating presence. Earth is much more than a ball of water, dirt and air spinning through space. Earth is more than a speck of stardust that spawned life. Earth is God's sanctuary. Earth is a sacred site in the cosmos.

Jeremiah, a prophet who is very sensitive to both the pain of his people and the groaning of creation, reminds us that God 'fills' both heaven and Earth (23.23). God's presence is everywhere, permeating all of creation. Or in the language of Martin Luther, God's presence is 'in, with and under' every atom and organism of this physical world. God 'with us' means more than God is near us as a supportive companion. Or as Paul Santmire says in introducing Luther's position:

The Creator is continually overflowing into the created world: the Creator is 'in, with and under' all things, immediately present, not lifted up at the apex of some grand hierarchy, far removed from the world. (2000, p.81)

Revealing the Presence

Another Earth reading that records a similar truth about creation is Psalm 19. The Psalmist begins:

The skies keep announcing the glory of God,
The firmament proclaims his creation.
Day talks to day
And night communicates with night!
There is speech, but no words,
Their voice is not heard!
Yet their voice goes out through all of Earth
And their words to the end of the world. (Ps. 19-1-4)

According to this Psalm, the skies above are conscious of the glory of God, the silent shimmering presence of God in creation. Night and day echo their message about God's presence, but all in silence. Communication is experienced throughout creation even when no vocal word is spoken. Creation is conscious of Earth as a sanctuary.

Luther speaks of the masks of God (*larvae dei*) in creation. According to Luther, the face or presence of God is behind all creation. Earth is filled with God's presence/glory. Nature is like a mass of masks—everything from lizards to lightning, from snakes to sunsets, are masks of God. Those with faith can discern the very face/presence of God in, with and under all creation, including the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Creation both hides and reveals God's presence. God is not only the Creator; God also wears creation like a total mask. God's presence is veiled behind all of creation for those with eyes to see.

Psalm 19 suggests that creation can be viewed as more than a mask. There is also an impulse in creation to reveal the very presence of God to those who have spirits that see or souls that hear. The skies are 'proclaiming' the presence of God. This impulse to reveal is more than the traditional claim that one can argue for the existence of a Creator on the basis of the wonder and majesty of creation. Earth is a sanctuary in which the sacred impulses of life are being revealed; God's presence is proclaimed by the skies.

St Paul makes it quite clear that the invisible power and presence of God can be known to all peoples on Earth, so they have no reason not to believe there is a Creator (Rom. 1.19-20). The glory (*kabod*), however, is different from the power of God. The glory is an expression of God's visible presence; the glory is God's presence revealed. Within the glory there is an impulse to reveal God's presence.

And, according to Isaiah 6.3, the whole Earth is filled with that glory, that impulse to reveal God's presence. That means, I believe, that not only is Earth spiritual, filled with divine presence, but that Earth has a hidden impulse to reveal that presence to those willing to see, hear, feel or discern it. That means that when we wander out into the bush, or the mountains or the ocean, away from heavy human distractions, we too may be able to sense that presence filling all of Earth. The presence is here in Earth, not in some distant heaven. Earth is a chosen sanctuary of God, a sanctuary in which we worship.

If Earth is indeed God's sanctuary, then we have the opportunity to see God's presence all around us. Isaiah went into the sanctuary in Jerusalem to experience God's presence. We now know that Earth is also God's sanctuary. We are living in God's chosen planet. If we open our eyes of faith to behold the clouds, forests and rocks anew, we should be able to see God's visible presence in all of Earth.

If our spirit becomes sensitive to this Earth as God's sanctuary, we can become conscious of God's glory in the soil as well as the sunset, the fronds of a fern as well as the eyes of a lion.

There may indeed be other sacred sites God has chosen in the cosmos. There may be other planets filled with life. And God's pulsating presence is everywhere (Ps. 139.7-12). Wherever the mysteries of life may yet be discovered in the cosmos, we are assured that this planet called Earth is a chosen place, a sanctuary, a sacred site in which we are privileged to live and worship.

For another discussion of this topic and a liturgy created especially to heighten our awareness of God's presence in creation I refer you to 'Song of Sanctuary', a liturgy in *Seven Songs of Creation* (Habel, 2004, 25-39).

This biblical revelation of how the glory of God fills Earth—and indeed all of creation—is quite distinct from the notion of pantheism. Pantheism is the belief that ‘*pan*’, meaning ‘everything’, is God. Isaiah and similar biblical writers maintain that God’s presence permeates everything and can be discerned in creation. God, however, is not the cosmos itself. As the study by the Uniting Church entitled *Healing the Earth* states:

God is not aloof from the world. God is in, with and under the earth—not in some pantheistic sense, but in the sense of the mystery of the Eucharist. (p.28)

Our Father who art in heaven

One of the problems we face as we seek to expand our spiritual consciousness and enter Earth as our sanctuary for worship, is our long history of worshipping in church buildings. Our orientation has been similar to that of Jacob. He had a remarkable dream one night and saw a ladder reaching up into heaven, with angels ascending and descending. When he awoke he was suitably amazed and called the place Bethel or the ‘house of God’ and declared it to be ‘the gate of heaven’ (Gen. 28.17).

Like Jacob, we have tended to view the church as a place apart from the rest of creation, a spiritual site where we can come closer to God in worship. Ultimately, however, the church has been viewed as a point of communication with the other world, with the domain of God, with heaven. Worship in such a sanctuary could become a place of escape from this world, a way of shutting out creation and all the curses it seemed to suffer, and making contact with the holy world of heaven.

The very orientation of much of our worship still directs our faith towards the spiritual other and away from the environmental presence of God. We pray ‘Our Father who art in heaven’ and all too readily understand that idiom as a designation of God’s permanent base of operations. We expect intervention from on high to give us our daily bread when, in fact, the impulse of our Creator is in, with and under the wheat and vines that produce our bread and wine.

Many of us have separated ourselves from Earth and directed our hearts toward heaven. While we lived on Earth physically, we lived in heaven spiritually—at least in church. For some the gap was much greater than others, but for all of us in the Christian tradition the words of Jesus--*Our Father who art in heaven*--helped maintain the separation, even if that prayer were never intended to function that way.

Robert Bos, in his theological reflection ‘Meeting God in Creation’ invites us to reflect on where we have felt close to God and invites us to reflect on where we have felt close to God as a personal presence in creation rather than in a church building. He speaks of how God ministers to us through creation in specific places. These places are spiritual, places where the Spirit touches our spirit. (Bos, 2002, 6-7)

A Safe and Sacred Place

A number of places that we humans consider especially sacred or unique, we have designated 'sanctuaries' for the rare or endangered species on Earth. These selected locations are few and far between, set apart because of increased devastation of Earth's precious habitats.

A theology of sanctuary recognises the whole Earth as sacred, as a planet chosen to preserve all forms of life. Earth is not only filled with God's presence, but with an infinite number of living presences that God has selected to live here. Earth is a sanctuary where the sacredness of all life is to be revered.

If Earth is indeed God's sanctuary, then we have the responsibility to keep it sacred and prevent it from being desecrated. Alas, we have polluted God's sanctuary in many ways – with toxins, bloodshed, waste. One of the worst ways we have desecrated God's sanctuary is through nuclear explosions and pollution. Let us consider but one example:

In Australia, for example, we desecrated vast tracts of land. After the Second World War, the Australian government wanted to please the British and help, as it said, 'to keep the free world free'. So the government agreed that the so-called mother country could test atomic bombs at a place in the centre of Australia called Maralinga. They said it was 'empty', except for a few Indigenous people.

The government officials tried to evacuate all the Indigenous Australians living there before they exploded the bombs, but they did not find them all. All life and lands in these areas were contaminated; Aboriginal Australians both inside and outside the prohibited zone were exposed to radioactive contamination and fallout. Some recall a 'black radioactive cloud' that brought sickness and death. The 'red sands', of which the people were proud and with which they had a spiritual bond, became 'poisoned' and grey. These sacred lands at the centre of Australia were contaminated; God's sanctuary was desecrated. And the Earth cried out in pain.

Similar stories can be told about how Earth has been desecrated in other parts of the globe. It is not just a few sites that are sacred; it is not just a few buildings that house God's presence. Earth is God's sanctuary and we are called to be custodians of a sacred place with a commission to make it safe for all species.

A Flesh and Blood Presence

For Christians, of course, the most powerful revelation of God's presence is seen in the person of Jesus Christ. The incarnation is not only the Word made flesh, but also God's glory (*kabod*) revealed. The classic text of John 1.14 reads:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's only son, full of grace and truth.

In this text we hear echoes of the glory (*kabod*) stories discussed above. The Greek expression translated ‘lived among’ is actually ‘tented among’ or ‘tabernacled among’ recalling how the divine presence filled the tent/tabernacle of God in the wilderness. When God becomes a human being called Jesus Christ, that same glory (*kabod*), the vibrant living presence of God shines through! Christ is ‘a sanctuary’ in flesh and blood. Jesus is God’s flesh and blood presence.

Just as the glory fills creation, it fills Christ. Just as we can, with the eyes of faith, see God in Jesus Christ, so with the eyes of the spirit we can see God in Earth. What happened when God’s presence shined through the man Jesus Christ still happens in creation.

Deep in Earth there has always been the impulse for God’s presence to be seen. By seeing that presence in Christ we are given the eyes of faith to see it more clearly in all creation. Christ opens our eyes to God’s presence—everywhere!.

The living presence was seen in Jesus Christ. What amazing biology! The impulse behind all life has become a single life, a single human being with a heart, an arterial system and a pulse. Here God is not some detached figure in the distant heavens. God joins the web of life. God is not present as a spirit *in* a body; God has become one of us, part of our biology. In Jesus we hear the heart beat of God and feel the pulse of God’s presence.

An Invocation and an Opportunity

A rich consciousness of Earth as God’s sanctuary can help us experience God’s living presence in creation—and in worship.

It is only fitting that a theology of sanctuary informs our worship in a Season of Creation. Our house of praise need not be a church building or a cathedral. God is not only present when we gather as a congregation in a church. God’s temple is in the bush. God’s cathedral is in the mountains. God’s sanctuary is anywhere and everywhere on Earth. God’s presence fills Earth. The silent presence of God invites us, I believe, to consider worshipping in a different sanctuary than our traditional churches. We are invited to enter the silent presence of God that fills Earth, the planet in which we live.

If, however, we do worship in our traditional location we need to begin with a consciousness of Earth as God’s sanctuary and that the location we have chosen can be a window to see the presence of God all around us, a gateway to the garden of Earth, an opportunity to discover Christ in, with and under every life form around us. Our sanctuary ought to be the place where we can feel the pulse of creation.

The opening invocation for a liturgy celebrating the season of creation quite appropriately acknowledges God's presence in the sanctuary of Earth. The following text offers one expression of praise as we come into God's sanctuary for worship. By using 'glory!' as a liturgical response to God's presence in this sanctuary, we are following the singers in the ancient temple who cry 'glory' when God appears in a storm and makes all creation quiver (Ps. 29.9). And with a new consciousness we can sing our *Sanctus* with the cry:

Holy! Holy! Holy!
Earth is filled with God's presence!

Or with the celestial powers we can respond:

Holy! Holy! Holy! God of cosmic powers!
Planet Earth is filled with your glory!

References

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