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 Chapel, LPTS

“Psalm 65--World Communion”

In the Multiple Intelligences class we have been spending time reflecting upon the ways space teaches us—what Howard Gardner calls spatial intelligence. Chair arrangements, table configurations, lighting, chalkboard placement, and all the ways space is arranged are constantly teaching us; and we have been trying to pay attention.

What are windows in a room—or lack of windows—teaching us? Or the view? What does it mean to have everyone facing the front of the room—either toward the teacher or toward a power point screen? What are the advantages? The disadvantages? What about having a personal computer sitting between you and others. What does a room’s design communicate—what do tall ceilings or fireplaces say? Or what are we learning from the thermostats that are out of whack? Or what would change if a class were to meet outside? Educationally, we are learning all the time even by the simplest things such as how our own bodies are configured in space (as a certain worship professor would remind us—the pews are teaching us something).

What is the artwork of a place teaching us—like these beautiful stain-glass windows, or the architecture, or the acoustics? What invites our attention? What communicates intimacy or presence, what teaches us about openness or transcendence? Space matters. Specific places matter in learning and in worship, and they matter theologically, they matter to our minds and to our souls. So as a class we have been trying to pay attention in order to learn to interpret the texts of place with the care that we so often give to words.

So, it is with these spatial matters in mind that I invite you to listen to the text for today, to pay attention to what happens to our sense of place as the Word speaks to us. Psalm 65 is a psalm of Thanksgiving. It is part of the daily lectionary for today, in fact, but it is often read in Thanksgiving Services. It was NOT the text for World Communion Sunday, last Sunday, but I think it could have been.

May God grant us the ears to hear.

Psalm 65

- 1 Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed,
- 2 O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come.
- 3 When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.
- 4 Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.
- 5 By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.
- 6 By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might.
- 7 You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.

8 *Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.*

9 *You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.*

10 *You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.*

11 *You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.*

12 *The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,*

13 *the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy. (NRSV)*

This is God's Holy Word for a Holy place and people. Thanks be to God.

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One of my favorite places in the whole world, a place that expands my sense of space every time I visit, is along the Mississippi River—the Great River—as the Ojibwa called it, just north of St. Louis. This is where I grew up, on the Illinois side, and towering along the water are tremendous limestone bluffs, bluffs my brothers and I would often hike when we were growing up. Gaining a hundred or more feet over the river's banks offered a grand view of the territory, expanding our sense of the area. Some days we could even just make out that new gateway arch down in St. Louis, some 30 miles away; some days we thought we could hear the crack of Orlando Cepeda's baseball bat coming from the Busch Stadium.

But not only would space expand—time would as well. We would try to imagine how long it must have taken the river to carve away these bluffs. Hundreds of years, we told ourselves, thousands even. It was an unimaginable amount of time to consider, but we would try.

So, maybe it's the perspective, or maybe it's the reference to the river, but whenever I hear this Psalm, I find myself transported to my home town, those bluffs where we could see so far away and imagine time on such a grand scale. And I also think of my home church, my Temple—whose very walls were made from that limestone—and where I first heard the Psalm read and where the grace of Jesus Christ flowed like the Great River.

I don't know if you noticed, but Psalm 65 starts out in the Temple. The God of this Temple is the one who knows our iniquities, knows that our transgressions overwhelm us. But, just like that (snap) the psalm shifts from transgression to pardon.

Verse 3: *“When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,”* (snap) *“you forgive our transgressions.”*

The psalm refuses to let us wallow, to let us stay stuck; the psalm refuses to let us keep the attention on ourselves, even our sinful selves.

*“By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,”* says verse 5, *“O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.”*

Taking us out of our overwhelmed selves, the psalm gives us a grand view of the world, as if we were standing on the tallest bluff on the planet. And from that view we can even just make out the farthest seas, the ends of the earth, we can even hear the shouts of joy going up to the Creator.

*Those who live at earth's farthest bounds, says verse 8, are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.*

The psalm delivers us from a closed-in perspective, and throws us into a much larger world, a community that includes “all flesh” that reaches to “earth’s farthest bounds” to the very “ends of the earth and the farthest seas.” The way this psalm moves us from here to the whole world is enough to blow our spatially intelligent minds. As one commentary puts it: “The psalm sets thanksgiving in a universal context” and in turn that “breaks open the proclivity to celebrate our national identity. [The psalm] binds the congregation to people in the most distant places....” (Brueggemann, *Genesis*)

The paradox of this is that this big, grand, universal angle on the world changes the way we know up close, face to face. Standing upon this psalm, we can see all the peoples of the earth, every land and culture, every tribe and nation. This vision, this binding of ourselves to people everywhere, reconfigures our table arrangements here and now, the way we sit with each other in this time and this place. The big, universal picture rearranges our everyday notions about who belongs in the community, in this community.

“*You visit the earth and water it,*” says verse 9, “*...the river of God is full of water*” And God’s grace, here, flows freely over the entire planet, regardless of the boundaries and borders that we might set up. God’s river of grace baptizes the whole world, offering water stations in the desert for those who need it most.

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The odd thing is, the psalm does not stop here. In fact, the psalm takes a pretty weird turn, so much so, that if this had been written in the 1960’s, I’d say someone slipped a little something into the psalmist’s Kool-aid.

Not only will all flesh come to God, according to the psalm, creation itself gets into this act of praise and thanksgiving: “the hills gird themselves with joy,” says the psalm, “the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,” the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy. All of a sudden we are thrown into an even larger community—not only all tribes and nations—not only all flesh, but the whole “community of creation” as Jurgen Moltmann puts it. First we move out of our national identity, but then the psalm even breaks open proclivity for human identity—and in doing so binds us to creation everywhere, creation that is already praising God.

This is the community of creation praising the Creator. Or maybe we should call it the communion of creation, or maybe we should call it “world communion.” Maybe we should take the phrase “world communion” more literally.

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My bluff-climbing brothers both grew up to become scientists. One of them, Steve, grew up to become a geologist (a rock-head we call him) and he's married to Ann, a hydro-geologist. The texts that they interpret for a living are, to say the least, of a different order than the ones I work on. They literally study the earth, the ground, rocks, water and where it all comes from. The history they study reaches farther back than I can even imagine, and at no time have I felt the difference more than one day a few years ago when we had all met at my parents' home in Southern Illinois for Thanksgiving.

It was the day after, the Friday after Thanksgiving and, while the whole world seemed to be out shopping, my nephew Patrick, four years old at the time, had another idea, one prompted by his geologist parents. Patrick approached my teenagers and me with a question.

"Do you guys want to go hunt for trilobites?"

"What?" my daughter Cora, the child of ministers, asked, assuming that the 4 year-old Patrick was mispronouncing something. "What was that Patrick?"

"Do you want to go hunt for trilobites?" This time clearly pronouncing the mystery word: try—low—bites.

"Uh, sure Patrick," my son David answered, "but what's a trilobite?"

As we gathered our coats, my brother Steve explained to us. "They're some of the oldest critters on earth and you can find their fossils in the bluffs."

"Cool, so how old are trilobites?"

"Oh, around here, 500 million or so."

"500 million--*Years!*" I questioned, "half a billion *years?*"

"Well, they're Cambrian, so yeah, somewhere in the 500 range give or take 50 million years."

So with Patrick leading the way, we spent a couple of relaxed hours scouting about the bluffs and caves of my home town hunting for signs of some of its first multi-celled inhabitants and thinking about time from the perspective of rivers and rocks and old critters whose age could be off by 50 million years and not matter much. I found myself wondering who or what will be hunting our fossils a half a billion years from now? By the geological clock, though, humanity is just a tick between ice ages.

"Here's one" I heard Patrick's mother Ann yell out, "part of one anyway." Sure enough, there it was, a trilobite fossil, half of one, maybe an inch long, a bug, an ancient ancestor older than my mind wanted to grasp. Seeing the fossil up close, touching it, somehow made it more real. And now, with evidence of a real trilobite resting under a hundred or more feet of limestone, I began to wonder, well, how it got there. Why was there rock on top of these creatures? I was beginning to realize how under-trained I was in what Howard Gardner would call naturalist intelligence.

"So, How'd it get there?" I asked, revealing my ignorance.

"What?"

"The trilobite," I said, "How'd a little bug like this get in the rock."

"Well," my brother said as if it were obvious, "it's limestone."

“Oh yeah, okay,” and I shut up for a minute. I finally just jumped. “Well, what is limestone, exactly?”

“Sedimentary rock, mostly calcium carbonate—shells and bones from sea life.”

“Hmm.” I thought about it for a moment. Then it hit me.

“*Sea* life?” We were a thousand miles away from an ocean.

“Yeah, once upon a time this was all under water—a tropical ocean—down near the equator in fact, before the continents drifted.”

I tried to get my head around the fact that Southern Illinois, my home, this place beneath my feet was once thousands of miles somewhere else, and under an ocean. (Talk about re-arranging my spatial mind!)

Then I looked up again at a hundred feet of sedimentary rock above me, realizing that the bluff itself was composed of life—millions and millions and millions, of years of life—and I won’t swear to it, but I thought I saw the bluff move.

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The sun was setting on this beautiful afternoon of trilobite hunting on the day after Thanksgiving in one of my favorite places and it was time to go. I looked out over the river, and for a moment I felt connected to it all—to creations living and dead, to trilobites and children, to the bluffs and the river itself and waters of life everywhere gracing the earth. I was grateful to be at home.

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Biblical texts and geological texts differ in many ways but both have a way of rearranging our minds, shifting our sense of time and place if not our sense of home and community. When it comes to the world community, the communion of creation, there is of course a lot of work to be done, a lot of rearranging to do. Borders and boundaries are configured in terrible ways and the earth’s thermostat is out of whack. Our proclivities and transgressions overwhelm us.

But I am enough of a child of the Reformation—if not this Psalm—to believe that the energy to do the hard work flows from gratitude. In her fine book “50 Ways to Help Save the Earth” Rebecca Barnes Davies makes this point beautifully, even as she provides many helpful ideas for addressing our out of whack relationship to the world. The keys to transformation she points out are Sabbath and Jubilee—times of rest, she says “and [to] celebrate God’s presence.”

Good advice, I believe, and true to Psalm 65, a text that invites gratitude, gratitude for the creative power of God that has been around a long, long time. Thanksgiving for Holy Love that stirs our gratitude for one another, and moves us to delight in creation.

In the end, the grace of God is older than we can get our minds around, wider than we can imagine, and more abundant than the earth can contain.

Praise is due to you O God. Amen.