As we go about the world, everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch ... \(\text{plants in us} \ldots \text{something of heaven.} \) - Thomas Merton

"In the beginning, God said ... " These words usher in the most extraordinary account of creation: an account of abundance, of multiplicity, of creativity. Creation is God's intricate work of art, and human beings are privileged to be placed within it. In this Season of Creation, we celebrate God the Creator, we thank God for the extraordinary riches of his grace. But we also come in sorrow for the way we have defaced creation and misused it for our own ends. In this Season, let's find again a true vision of what being made in the image of God, caring for creation can mean, and commit ourselves to action.

—Archbishop Justin Welby.

While the traditional lectionary year is primarily focused around the life of Jesus of Nazareth - the Christ in human flesh - Creation Season is a time set aside for us to purposefully focus on God as Creator through the Christ, the entity through whom - as John reminds us - all things came into being: this planet Earth, the vast expanse of interstellar space, all those things that creep, walk, fly, or swim including you, me, and our neighbors. Today will focus on the Forest. Next Sunday will focus on the land, the next - wilderness, after that - rivers. We’ll culminate Creation Season with a celebration of St. Francis, patron of the animals.

Over these next few weeks I invite you to, as St. Benedict wrote, strive to “Listen with the ear of your heart,” paying close attention to the words, the song, and the images in our services. If you do, I think you will walk out of here with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for not only the work of God, but of God Godself and your siblings - not only the ones who walk upright on two legs, but also our sibling who swim in the sea, those who reach from earth rooted roots towards the sky, those who wash up on the shore and water the fields. If you listen with the ear of your heart you might discover many more children of God - your siblings in creation.

With that, let us begin.
I want to begin with a little story that was relayed to me by a friend who had recently returned from a long trip to Ireland. On the first morning in Ireland she awoke, disoriented from jet lag and shuffled into the kitchen of the old country farmhouse in which she stayed. While sitting at the wooden table nursing her tea, my friend noticed her host standing over a new package of bread. The host stood there and stood there and stood there. “For a moment,” my friend said, “I thought she’d had some type of stroke.” Just when my friend began to worry, the host came back to life and opened the package of bread. Curious, my friend asked her host what she’d been doing. Who replied,

“Oh, I’ve just been acknowledging God in the bread. You see, it’s an ancient custom. Over a new package of bread we pause and remember the good earth in which the seed was planted. Then we remember the nourishing sun and the rain. Then the work of the farmer who tills, tends, and harvests the wheat. And the tractor and the trailer and driver that carries the harvest to the mill and the mill and mill hands who turn the harvest into flour. Then the truck and driver who carries the flour to the bakery and the baker and the machinery and that turn that flour into bread and put it in this little plastic sack. Then the truck and driver who carry that bread to this little country village where finally it awaits me at the store. This is all part of God’s good creation. For which, I am grateful.”

After a long pause, the host concluded saying, “In a moment we will toast this bread and we will take all of this creation - the earth and sun and seed and hands, and machinery, all this creation - we will take into ourselves. Ourselves, who will eventually return to the earth for the cycle to begin again” …………………………………………………………..

And how many of us just untwist the tie and thoughtlessly take the loaf out of the package?

I tell you this story for two purposes. First, to remind us that we and all of creation are interwoven as a great tapestry of being. As John Donne wrote, “No man is an isle, entire of himself.” And second, to remind us that at the heart of our
Episcopal / Church of England heritage lies our Celtic roots. Let me begin with the second part.

As I hope you know, the Episcopal Church is the American daughter of the Church of England. We don’t call ourselves the Church of England because of a little revolution against England in 1776. And after a revolution it’s generally not a good idea to continue to name yourself after the country from which you have just waged war. Never-the-less, our roots, our worship, our understanding of God, our prayers are drawn from the Church in England.

These roots run deep. The Church in England has its indigenous roots in the religious practices of the Celtic peoples of the British Isles. The reality is that no matter how much an occupying force attempts to rout out indigenous religious beliefs, it never happens. That’s why Mexican Roman Catholic girls still celebrate an Aztec religious ceremony called a quinceañera. In the Celt’s situation, the occupying force of the British Isles was Rome’s version of Christianity, especially St. Augustine’s theory of Original Sin, which says that with the “fall” of Adam and Eve all creation is inherently marred and essentially separate from God.

St. Augustine’s way of understanding the world is called “dualism.” Dualism sees the world as two separate entities: things that are profane and things that are holy, here and there. In practice, dualism often ends up with the type of thinking that separates things and people into the righteous and the unrighteous, us and them, the right and the wrong, sinners and saints - the saved and the damned. A purity test religion.

Celtic Christianity never embraced Augustine’s theory. Instead, Celtic Christianity understood, and still practices today, a worldview that there is no separation between the Creator and creation. That the Creator, God, is all in all; that the Creator is “the ground of all being.” The phrase that best captures this idea for me is “There is no place where God is not.” No place. Where God is not.

Let’s spend a few minutes with that idea.

1 Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology
Think back to your earliest childhood memories of creation. Maybe it was the power of the ocean surf crashing onto a beach. Perhaps your earliest connection to the earth was lying in the grass on a warm summer day, feeling and smelling the greenness of it all. Or, maybe staring up at the summer night sky, awed by the vast starlit quilt overhead. Or, maybe it was watching sunlight dappling through autumn leaves……... Connected to these moments will be recollections of experiencing, at the deepest of levels, a type of communion with God in nature.

As a young boy my family lived on the edge of an undeveloped ravine. Along the ravine’s bottom coursed a trickling creek. When I put my mind to it I vividly recall lying on my belly at the edge of the creek, dappled sunlight spotting the ground, immersed by the splash of water, watching eggs emerge as tadpoles then reshape into frogs. I distinctly remember the sense of being connected with God in the light, the sound, the water, the developing frogs. I didn’t call it God because I was just a little kid, but I knew it was the presence, the life that spawns and connects all of creation. All of us. Non-dualism.

Unfortunately, for those of us who were influenced by Augustine’s dualistic version of Christianity we were soon taught that God is separate from Creation. We were shaped to believe that spirituality is about looking away from this physical life towards God out there, ensconced on a heavenly throne. Think about it, when you close your eyes and pray, in what direction do your prayers go towards? I bet pretty much all of us habitually direct our prayers to something out there, in the beyond. It’s just the way we were shaped because we were raised in Augustinian Christianity.

Celtic Christianity, the spiritual heart of the Church in England, sees the Creator in a different way. Yes, the Creator is beyond us, transcendent, out there. But (and this is an important but) the Creator is at the same time right here, not just beside us, but within us, at the very core of our beings. And not just within us human beings, but within the heart of everything in Creation - even within that loaf of bread in that sack on the counter waiting to become one with your body.

Listen with the ear of your heart to these words of a Celtic Christian monk and theologian named Pelagius, who wrote
Look at the animals roaming the forest: God’s spirit dwells within them. Look at the birds flying across the sky: God’s spirit dwells within them. Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass….Look at the fish in the river and the sea: God’s spirit dwells within them. There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent….When God pronounced that (God’s) creation was good, it was not only that (God’s) hand had fashioned every creature to life.

Look, also, at the great trees of the forest; look at the wild flowers and the grass in the fields; look even at your crops. God’s spirit is present within all plants as well. The presence of God’s spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful; and if we look with God’s eyes, nothing on the earth is ugly.  

And what were those words by Herman Hesse which Ellen so beautifully shared with us?

“Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life. A tree says: A kernel is hidden in me, a spark, a thought, I am life from eternal life.”

When we look with God’s eyes what we discover is that we and all of creation - humanity, the animals, the trees of the forests, the fish in the sea, the crops in the field, and even those tadpoles in the pond at the bottom of my childhood ravine - all things are interwoven as a great tapestry of being, imbued by the Ground of all being, filled with the Divine Spark. There is no place where God is not.

Now, this is all lovely and touchy-feely and everything. But, so what? So what that the Creator is here as close as the breath within our lungs and the blood coursing through our veins? So what that we and all of creation are interwoven as a great tapestry of being? So what?

Well, I am glad you asked…….

---

2 *The Letters of Pelagius*
I want to give you another piece of Celtic Christianity that might challenge us and consequently ask us to live in a different way.

Let’s go back to our friend Pelagius, who the Church in Rome declared a heretic in the year 431.

Pelagius and Augustine lived at the same time and became great enemies because of their opposing ideas. But the real issue for Rome was that Pelagius was very clear in his writings that the leaders of the church must live simply and without great wealth. Like Jesus. Well, the bishops of the church were Europe’s largest land holders and vastly wealthy. They did not like to hear that they should live simple lives.

Pelagius also had an annoying habit of teaching women and viewing women as equals to men (I know! Scandalous!). Perhaps the thing that finally did Pelagius in was his insistence that every child is born in the unsullied image of God; and that with the birth of a child God is giving birth to God’s image in the world. This conflicted with Augustine’s belief that at birth a child lacks the image of God until it is restored in the sacrament of baptism. Which of course, retained power for the Church over the people. For you see, if your baby is damned to hell unless she is baptized, and the Church is the sole dispenser of baptisms….. well, that’s a lot of power. And power ……. power is addictive.

But, here’s the piece that Celtic Christianity teaches which was probably most challenging for the Church, then and today. Pelagius wrote:

You will realize that doctrines are inventions of the human mind, as it tries to penetrate the mystery of God. You will realize that Scripture itself is the work of human minds, recording the example and teaching of Jesus. Thus it is not what you believe that matters; it is how you respond with your heart and your actions. It is not believing in Christ that matters;” Pelagius wrote, “it is becoming like Jesus.”

---

3 The Letters of Pelagius, 48.
Let me repeat that: “…it is not what you believe that matters; it is how you respond with your heart and actions. It is not believing in Christ that matters; it is becoming like Jesus.” Just like those WWJD bracelets reminded us.

Do you remember when Jesus said to the Pharisees,

“What’s not important are all the human precepts that you’ve come up with such as the ritual washing of hands. What is important is what arises from your heart and comes out of your mouth and your life. It is how you treat people, creation, and yourself that matters to God.”

“…it is not what you believe that matters; it is how you respond with your heart and your actions. It is not believing in Christ that matters; it is becoming like Christ.” In other words: Christ-ian

There, beloved, is the challenging “So what?” as we enter into this Season of Creation. If the Creator is in and of creation - this fragile earth, our island home - if God’s spirit is in the waters of the trickling creek and the roar of the ocean’s waves, how would Jesus interact with God’s creation? If what truly matters in our Christianity is that we are to become like Jesus….. how do we interact with God in God’s creation? Not just acknowledging God in creation - that’s just the lip work - but what do we do with God’s creation? What do we do with God who is literally present in and through all creation?

If God is not just “out there” but also right here if God is indeed the “ground of all being” and there is no place where God is not, including the trees of the forests and waves of the ocean - when we deforest the Amazon for more cattle grazing land for our cheap hamburgers; when we inject arsenic and other poisons into the earth in our quest for cheap gasoline; when the current president unwraps a new rule encouraging drilling for oil in the nation’s natural forests\(^4\) (which he did just last week) - if we are to become like Jesus - how would Jesus interact with, as St. Francis calls it, Brother Earth? If we get to the point where we truly see with

God’s eyes the great tapestry of creation, all of which contains God’s being - then how do we live with both deep gratitude and enacted responsibility?

Let us pray.

Give us eyes to see and ears to hear your living spirit in all of creation. In the fish swimming in the sea and the wheat fields springing forth from the soil. In our brethren and in ourselves. Then, O God, help us to honor your living spirit not just with our lips but also with our lives. Amen.