

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 1, John 14:1–4

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

God of our Salvation, your bow in the clouds proclaims your covenant with every living creature. Teach us your paths and lead us in your truth, that by your Holy Spirit, we may remember our baptismal vows and be keepers of your trust with earth and its inhabitants. Amen.

Genesis 1 (The Message)

First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don’t see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

God spoke: “Light!” And light appeared. God saw that light was good and separated light from dark. God named the light Day, God named the dark Night. It was evening, it was morning—Day One.

God spoke: “Sky! In the middle of the waters; separate water from water!” God made sky. God separated the water under sky from the water above sky. And there it was. God named sky the Heavens. It was evening, it was morning—Day Two.

God spoke: “Separate! Water-beneath-Heaven, gather into one place; Land, appear!” And there it was. God named the land Earth. God named the pooled water Ocean. God saw that it was good.

God spoke: “Earth, green up! Grow all varieties of seed-bearing plants, every sort of fruit-bearing tree.” And there it was. Earth produced green seed-bearing plants, all varieties, and fruit-bearing

trees of all sorts. God saw that it was good. It was evening, it was morning—Day Three.

God spoke: “Lights! Come out! Shine in Heaven’s sky! Separate Day from Night. Mark seasons and days and years, Lights in Heaven’s sky to give light to Earth.” And there it was.

God made two big lights, the larger to take charge of Day, the smaller to be in charge of Night; and God made the stars. God placed them in the heavenly sky to light up Earth and oversee Day and Night, to separate light and dark. God saw that it was good. It was evening, it was morning—Day Four.

God spoke: “Swarm, Ocean, with fish and all sea life! Birds, fly through the sky over Earth!” God created the huge whales, all the swarm of life in the waters, and every kind and species of flying birds. God saw that it was good. God blessed them: “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Ocean! Birds, reproduce on Earth!” It was evening, it was morning—Day Five.

God spoke: “Earth, generate life! Every sort and kind: cattle and reptiles and wild animals—all kinds.” And there it was: wild animals of every kind, cattle of all kinds, every sort of reptile and bug. God saw that it was good.

God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflect our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.” God created human beings; God created them godlike, reflecting God’s nature. God created them male and female. God blessed them: “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the

sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.”

Then God said, “I’ve given you every sort of seed-bearing plant on Earth and every kind of fruit-bearing tree, given them to you for food. To all animals and all birds, everything that moves and breathes, I give whatever grows out of the ground for food.” And there it was.

God looked over everything God had made; it was so good, so very good! It was evening, it was morning—Day Six.

John 14:1–4

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

When I had graduated seminary and received my first call in Illinois, a dear friend, who was also the wife of a pastor, gave my wife Kelly and I some advice. She said that it was possible, as a pastor that we would move several times, and that we might not be certain how long we might be in a particular call. She said that when we arrived in Illinois that we should make an effort to unpack all of our boxes and settle in, and make the place our home as soon as possible, as if we were going to be there for a long time. She said it was important to make your place, to make your home. She said that she and her husband did not do that in their first call, because they thought they would only be there a few years, and she always regretted it. She regretted because, one, they never felt

settled and at home, and two, they ended up staying much longer than they had anticipated.

When Kelly and I arrived in Illinois, we first moved into an apartment and then eight months later we moved into the house we purchased. In both locations we made our living space our home as fast as possible. We knew the apartment was a temporary living situation as we got to know the area and searched for a home, but we still unpacked most of our boxes, we painted walls (which we had to repaint when we moved out), and we hung pictures. When we bought our house, we did the same thing, making the house our home and settling in as fast as possible. I thought we might be in Illinois where I served as an associate pastor for somewhere between three to five years. That was about the average length of an associate pastor's term. We were there for 10. I'm so glad we listened to our friend.

Place is important. Place is essential to who we are and who we become. Author Cole Arthur Riley writes, "Place is the one thing that always is. We are always somewhere." She goes on to say "Isn't it something that in Genesis, God makes a home for things before God makes the things? Not the fish first but the sea. Not the birds first but the sky. Not the human first but the garden. I like to think of God hunched over in the garden, fingernails hugging the brown soil, mighty hands cradling mud like it's the last flame in a windstorm. A God who says, *Not out of my own womb out of this here dust I will make you.* Place has always been the thing that made us."ⁱ

Place continues to be a theme even when God's people are in bondage and exile in Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah tells the people that God wants them to "...build house and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce" [Jeremiah 29:5].

As part of what is known as Jesus' farewell discourse, after the Last Supper with the disciples and before his crucifixion, Jesus tells the disciples in a moment of comfort that he is leaving to prepare a place for them. And reassures them that, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

Place is a major theme and how God operates in the world. As the creation account shows, the world is a place for God's presence.ⁱⁱ A theology of place has several implications and responsibilities then.ⁱⁱⁱ

The first place for us to start is to recognize the underlying foundations for how we think about place. We often talk about ownership of land, which is an understanding with deep roots in western white supremacist ways of thinking. This idea of ownership grounded the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny. It has led to the domination of the land and ecological disasters. Aldo Leopold, a writer, professor, and ecologist who greatly influenced the development of environmental ethics in the middle of the 20th century, wrote, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."^{iv}

Rather than ownership a biblical understanding of place starts with stewardship. This is a relationship built on care and responsibility. Christian stewardship is to recognize that everything comes from God as a gift, and it is our responsibility to maintain and use those gifts wisely; to be co-workers and collaborators with God in the work of creation.

Stemming from stewardship is also to acknowledge how we came to be in this place and to recognize the original stewards of the land. Our first step in this process has been to offer a land acknowledgement. The land acknowledgement is the start to repair what has been broken. We recognize that a statement isn't enough and that it must be followed by

actions that repair the harm done. Oak Grove's Land Acknowledgement reads,

We collectively acknowledge that Oak Grove Presbyterian Church is located on the traditional and ancestral lands of Indigenous people. We reside on land that holds great historical, spiritual, and personal significance for the Dakota, Native Nations and Indigenous people of the region. The land was ceded by the Dakota to the U.S. Government through treaties created and upheld with racist underpinnings.

By offering this land acknowledgment, we affirm tribal sovereignty and will work to hold Oak Grove Presbyterian Church accountable to Indigenous people and Nations. We recognize, and continually seek to support and advocate for the sovereignty of the Native Nations in this territory and beyond.

One act and a small step has been to open our worship each week with this underlying foundation of stewardship and the acknowledgment of the harm done to the first stewards of this place. Again, we recognize this as a beginning step, and we continue to look for ways to honor relationships and take actions to repair relationships.

A second implication and responsibility of a theology of place is to recognize that place is particular. There is a differentiation in some of the Christian literature about place between a particular place and the more abstract notion of "space." We live in specific times and places, and this impacts who we are, what we do, and how we relate with God and our neighbors. We are set in a particular context in a particular place. If we are the hands and feet of God in the world to do God's mission, and we are, how we go about that is dependent on our location, on our place. What ministry and mission looks like for us in Bloomington, Minnesota is different than what it looks like in North Minneapolis, or

Bemidji, Rochester, Fergus Falls, or Duluth. Let alone, some other state or country. There is a question that is popular, and profound, in church life which is, “If we were to close our doors, who would notice?” The hope, and call, is that it matters that we are in this particular place to do our part of God’s mission.

Another responsibility is to recognize place as a gift and a calling. Place is important from a theological understanding because it is through particular places that we act within the created world as a whole. We are called to cultivate and protect the earth and treat the land responsibly as a gift. It means that we approach our responsibility as a calling to responsibility and care. We are to tend the garden. In valuing place, we are fulfilling our calling as human beings living in the world made by God. It is to recognize the harm and abuse done to the earth. It is to recognize that creation is in crises, and to do all that we can to counteract climate change.

We recognize that place is also the center of meaning. It is a place of identity. The creation story culminates not on day six, but on day seven when God rested. What is implied in that ancient story, and the understanding of those who originally heard that story was that God created the world as a temple in which God could rest. For the ancient Israelites, the temple was not only the center of everyday life, but also the center of their world. Place functions as the particular center of meaning of our knowledge of the world and our understanding of the world spreads out from there. Our identity is also intimately related to this notion of place as center. For instance, our sense of identity and belonging in place might be said to radiate out from a specific house or neighborhood, town, county, state, country, then world. Although we know the church is the people, for many, the place of church is important to them. The sanctuary is the place where we can be centered, where we

celebrate and mourn, where we make sense of the world. Where significant events are marked. Place becomes a center for meaning.

Lastly, place is ultimately relational. From the creation we are made in the image of God, and God is relationship. We cannot thrive and exist on our own outside of place and relationship. It is our relationship that constitutes our being. We are, in fact, nothing if not for the relationships in which we exist: relationships to a people and a place. “The church is not a collection of individuals who choose to associate primarily to have their spiritual needs met,” but rather “a community of mutual participation in God’s own life and the life of the world.”^v

As one author says, place is “the seat of relations and of meeting and activity between God and the world.”^{vi} Throughout scripture, we see a three-way relationship between God, people, and place. Places are where we experience God and one another.

Place is important because it is a gift from God, it can form our identity and understanding of the world, it is where we build relationship, and serve as co-creators with God. The world is God’s and all that is in it.

I leave us with a poem by Wendell Berry. It comes from a collection of poems that were written over the years as he would take Sabbath walks around the place he lived in Kentucky. They were written mostly outdoors.

There is a day when the road neither comes nor goes and the way is not a way but a place.^{vii} Amen.

ⁱ Cole Arthur Riley, “This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us.” Page 18.

ⁱⁱ John H. Walton, “The Lost World of Genesis One” Pages 84–85.

ⁱⁱⁱ Several of these themes are discussed here: <https://www.transpositions.co.uk/some-thoughts-on-theology-and-place/>

^{iv} Aldo Leopold, “A Sand County Almanac.

^v 10 Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zschelle, “The Missional Church in Perspective” Page 107.

^{vi} Inge, “Christian Theology of Place.” Page 68.

^{vii} Wendell Berry, “A Timbered Choir” Page 216