

Earth Examen

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Good morning, God's people!

The theme for this Creation Sunday is land. I can think of no better theme as we gather outside, in the churchyard, on the land. Land is the foundation - the ground - for everything else.

Where is your grounding place?

A place that connects you with creation, with yourself, with God. That place where God can meet you. Our readings testify that a sense of place - and even more, paying attention to that place - opens us to God's presence. Israel believed their relationship with God was reflected through their relationship with the land. And this was not about obedience and reward - follow the law, get land - but about God's presence with them. "Who are we to have a God so near?" they ask in awe and praise. John's gospel opens with an ode to the Word - present from the beginning, source of life, through which all things came into being. And what else? The Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. The poem we heard by Wendell Berry begins in the restful sanctuary of Sabbath, begins in Paradise. And yet quickly calls us, however difficult, to place our feet on the ground.

It is a hard return from Sabbath rest
To lifework of the fields, yet we rejoice,
Returning, less condemned in being blessed

It is only when Berry returns to the lifework of the fields that he understands how earth and heaven are intertwined and imagines how we might restore that right relationship -- "harmony of earth is Heaven-made."

Where is your grounding place? And how can we return there this morning? Let us try through an earth examen.

An examen is a way of beholding an object or being in prayerful wonder. Through questions, you are invited to reflect on God's presence and the goodness of that which you behold.

Think of a place that grounds you. Maybe it's a childhood home. A particularly powerful pilgrimage. Maybe it is right here, St. Peter's churchyard. Where is your grounding place?

Before turning to your grounding place, we begin by naming the ground we are on - the land of the Lenape people, which was stolen from them and never returned. Notice this land, the ground beneath your feet. Feel your feet meeting the earth. Now imagine roots on the bottom of your feet, connecting you to the ground. They are deep roots, running as far into the ground as you can imagine. You are rooted. You are centered. You are connected.

Now, envision your grounding place. The details. The smells and sounds. Taste and touch. See it in your mind's eye. Find a comfortable place to rest in or near this place. Enter into prayer in whatever way is natural to you. Invite Holy Wisdom to open the eyes of your heart as we encounter the five movements of this examen.¹

1. Become aware of God's presence in the place that you are contemplating.

How is God present in this place? How does all the life you see exist in God's spirit? How do you feel knowing that the Holy Spirit has filled this place for geological ages, with every plant, animal, organism and mineral that has called this place home in the deep past, makes its home here with you now, and will live here with creatures in this place in the future? How do you feel knowing that you, earthling, belong to this place, are made of the same carbon, breathe the same air, are nurtured by the same cycles and life processes, and are enlivened by the same Spirit of the Creator?

2. Reflect on the ecological cycles of this place with gratitude for all that it provides.

What nutrient cycles are supported by this place? Is this a watershed that filters water? Is this a meadow or field that fixes nitrogen? Is this a green space that absorbs CO2 and cleans the air? What plants, animals, microbes and minerals are sheltered here? How do they serve the whole earth in their being? For all that this place provides to nurture you and all that belong to this place, let a feeling of gratitude fill you.

3. Pay attention to what you feel as you contemplate the fragility, health of this site.

Is this ecosystem healthy? What are the keys to sustaining the equilibrium and balance of this place? What are the sources of stress that threaten the balance of this particular ecosystem?

¹ <https://seasonofcreation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/2021-SOC-Earth-Examen.pdf>

How do you feel when you consider the fragility of life that depends on the health of this place?
What is your effect on this balance?

4. Choose one feature of the site and pray for it, its rest and its renewal.

When you consider the ways that this place is under stress, what does it need for rest, restoration and renewal? What needs to be conserved for this site to heal itself? What features need to be reclaimed? What parts of creation need to be restored to their rightful home here? Pray for this site, and the wisdom to care for it.

5. Look toward your response. What can you do to ease demands or promote the rest of this ecological site?

Based on your examination, how do you identify with this place? What have you discerned is required to care for this place? What will be your act of compassion to promote rest for this common home?

Today, your grounding place has given you the gift of memory. Remembering may look to the past but it also grounds us in the present with an eye to the future. Remember your connection to place - to the rest of creation, to God. Like creation, a place is not stagnant. There is always life beginning, brimming, ending and renewing. So we ground ourselves in a place, in the memory of belonging and care, and then the memory grows and spreads. God's kingdom grows and spreads. There is power in memory. In place. And in you. What will we do with it?

In his poem, "A Vision", Berry writes,

Memory
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament.

So much of Wendell Berry's work to restore our relationship to the land, to creation, begins with a lament that we no longer value the idea of place.

In an interview, a reporter observed, "A lot of people now come of age in places that feel like no place—a kind of vague American landscape, sculpted in part by corporations—which occasionally makes me wonder if homesickness, as a human experience, is itself on the verge of extinction."

"Well," Berry replied, "part of manners used to be to say to somebody you just met, "Where you from?" And I quit asking it, because so many people say they're from everywhere or nowhere. I'll tell you a little bit of my history..." And then he proceeds to share his grounding place.

I don't know any other place as carefully as I know this place...[that] has to mean that I honor the possibility that other people in other places would know their places as carefully as I know mine...There are millions of places on this planet that I don't know at all. But I have to be ready, if my love and knowledge of this place has spoken to me, to receive people coming from those other places, and say, "Look, these little places need to become a common cause."

Good morning, God's people!

This morning, I will be leading us in an ancient spiritual practice known as the examen. An examen is a prayerful invitation to reflect on our lives and recognize God's presence in them. Before we begin, I have a question: Where is your grounding place?

Wendell Berry, whose poem we heard this morning, centered his writing - and living - on the concept of place. Place as a living community where individuals find the identity that can undergird a commitment to stewardship and reverence for the land. Place connects you with yourself and the rest of creation. Place is where God can meet you.

In Deuteronomy, Moses looked at the land and proclaimed, "Who are we to have a God so near?" The land, as grounding place, is not only where the people experienced God but *how* they experienced God.

John's gospel opens with an ode to the Word - present from the beginning, through which all things came into being. That's cosmic - the biggest and fullest source of life. Almost unimaginable. But also, what else about the Word? The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In a particular place.

Berry's poem begins in the restful sanctuary of Sabbath, begins in Paradise. But it is only when Berry returns to the "lifework of the fields" that he understands how earth and heaven are intertwined and imagines how we might restore that right relationship.

Where is your grounding place? That place where you have a deep sense of knowing. Maybe it's a park from childhood. A favorite hiking route. Busy street corner. Maybe it is right here, in St. Peter's churchyard.

I'm going to invite you to close your eyes as we now begin this earth examen. We begin with the ground we are on. Land of the Lenni-Lenape, which was stolen from them and never returned. Consider all that has walked on this land, flown over it, grown out of it. Feel your feet meeting the earth. Imagine roots growing out the bottom of your feet. They are deep, running far into the ground. You are rooted. You are connected. You are centered.

Go to your grounding place. Take it in. The smells and sounds. Taste and touch. See it in your mind's eye. Find a comfortable spot to rest in or near this place. Enter into prayer in whatever way is natural to you as we move through the five parts of this examen.

1. Become aware of God's presence in the place that you are contemplating.

How is God present in this place? How do you feel knowing that the Holy Spirit has filled this place for geological ages, with every plant, animal, organism and mineral that has called this place home in the deep past, makes its home here with you now, and will live here with creatures in this place in the future? How do you feel knowing that you, earthling, belong to this place, are made of the same carbon, breathe the same air, are nurtured by the same cycles and life processes, and are enlivened by the same Spirit of the Creator?

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3. Pay attention to what you feel as you contemplate the fragility, health of this site.

Is this ecosystem healthy? What are the keys to sustaining the equilibrium and balance of this place? What are the sources of stress that threaten the balance of this particular ecosystem? How do you feel when you consider the fragility of life that depends on the health of this place? What is your effect on this balance?

4. Choose one feature of the site and pray for it, its rest and its renewal.

When you consider the ways that this place is under stress, what does it need for rest, restoration and renewal? What needs to be conserved for this site to heal itself? What features need to be reclaimed? What parts of creation need to be restored to their rightful home here? Pray for this site, and the wisdom to care for it.

5. Look toward your response. What can you do to ease demands or promote the rest of this ecological site?

Based on your examination, how do you identify with this place? What have you discerned is required to care for this place? What will be your act of compassion to promote rest for this common home?

During Creation Season, we celebrate and give thanks for all God created. It's a global, even universal praise. The same is usually true for our efforts to care for creation. We live in a time of globalism and we have more information now than ever before. There are gifts in this. And yet knowing and caring for the earth is so big it remains almost inconceivable on an individual level. Just like so many other callings and crises. It's easy for us to ignore or feel overwhelmed. There are millions of places on this planet that we don't know at all.

But what if we began with our grounding place? Recognizing that other people in other places know their places as carefully as you know yours. Are as dedicated to those places as you are to yours. Through the love and knowledge your grounding place has spoken to you, you receive people coming from those other places.

As Berry puts it:

Found your hope, then, on the ground under your feet.
Your hope of Heaven, let it rest on the ground
Underfoot. Be it lighted by the light that falls
Freely upon it after the darkness of the nights...
Let it be lighted also by the light that is within you,
Which is the light of imagination. By it you see
The likeness of people in other places to yourself
In your place. It lights invariably the need for care
Toward other people, other creatures, in other places
As you would ask them for care toward your place and you.

No place at last is better than the world. The world
Is no better than its places. Its places at last
Are no better than their people while their people
Continue in them. When the people make
Dark the light within them, the world darkens.