



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Bodies of Land: Becoming Naturalized to Place"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Helms Jarrell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On October 13, 2024, from Genesis 2:4-25

It is May 2024. I am with the Intercultural Leadership Institute Cohort caravanning from Rapid City, South Dakota through the badlands to the Oglala Lakota Artspace on Pine Ridge reservation. We are greeted with ceremony and song. We settle into gracious hospitality- coffee, water, and snacks, in hand- and are guided to a classroom where we are met by Indigenous Ways Educator, Helene Gaddie.

Each person is given a black piece of construction paper, scotch tape, a sewing needle, and a map. I get excited. I love maps. Helene tells us we are going to make stargazers. Following her instructions, we use the map to create a cylinder with holes in it matching the constellations of the Lakota sky. On the lower left corner is a map of Lakota territory, on the upper right corner is a map of the stars. Lines draw connections from one to the other.

The Lakota map represents a place where sacred lands meet the stars. The Lakota belief, "What is on the earth is in the stars, and what is in the stars is on the earth," is beautifully depicted through this map.

Then, Lakota culture bearers Ruth Cedar Face and Janice Richards present tipi teachings that depict a home, open at the top displaying the dark night sky, where families learn the way of the stars. Each tipi pole points to a star in the sky and represents a particular connection to that star's placement on the map and the tribal stories related to that particular star.

Lakota Star Knowledge charts an intimate familiarity with the geography of the Black Hills and links that sacred place to the astronomy above. This kind of knowing of place and sky grows from a long abiding with land and cosmos.

Generations of attentiveness to the stars teach the Lakota not only about the night sky but also about themselves. Humans on earth are connected to the stars above, a connection honored with story, prayer, ceremony, and a way of life. It develops a familiarity and kinship that defies the laws of gravity and time and exchanges them for a spirituality, a way of life that is deeply rooted in sacred attentiveness and relationship.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Bearing witness to Lakota Star Knowledge awakens in me a memory of a poem by Ada Limon entitled “Dead Stars.” A portion of it reads:

We point out the stars that make Orion as we take out
the trash, the rolling containers a song of suburban thunder.

It’s almost romantic as we adjust the waxy blue
recycling bin until you say, *Man, we should really learn
some new constellations.*

And it’s true. We keep forgetting about Antlia, Centaurus,
Draco, Lacerta, Hydra, Lyra, Lynx.

But mostly we’re forgetting we’re dead stars too, my mouth is full
of dust and I wish to reclaim the rising—
to lean in the spotlight of streetlight with you, toward
what’s larger within us, toward how we were born.

I want this kind of way, this kind of attentiveness, this kind of knowing... this kind of intimacy with Creation and Creator.

But The way I was born into ... the way I imagine most of us were born into... is very distant from the map of the Lakotas.

Walking outside at night, I would have to trek a while before finding some semblance of dark. Looking up at the night sky, we may be lucky to see a handful of stars, but not likely many and not many of us would know their stories of connection to the land, to ourselves.

Light pollution, towering buildings, expanding development, fossil fuel fumes, airplanes, and satellites block our view of the stars. All sorts of distractions block our knowledge of their stories.

Living in a way that reflects the value that people are relative, that we are mutually connected and related to all creation, requires us to confront all of the obstacles blocking our way: over consumption of resources, exploitation of people and land, competition, and greed.

We know in our gut and also because so many of our beloved guides proclaim a similar message. “We are all in some way products of an exploitative society. It would be foolish to pretend otherwise.”

There’s no way around it, we have to admit: **the Western way, the American Way, the Charlotte Way, the colonizing way, the patriarchal way, the Imperialist way, the Individualist way... is very distant from the sacred way.**



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

As much as we might be enamored with the idea of harmony and holistic relationship with God's ecosystem, what continues to grow in our society and psyche at a rapid pace is an expanding market, an exploitative economy, and an all-consuming culture of outdoing one another, ourselves, and our planet.

We've been thinking from the perspective of what is good for me and mine will be good for the world... we've got to turn ourselves around - some might even say repent- and come to understand that what is good for the world will be good for us.

In their book, *Journey to Eloheh: How Indigenous Values Lead us to Harmony and Wellbeing*, Indigenous theologians Randy and Edith Woodley write, living within [this kind of] false reality has consequences... *We think of the planet as something separate from us- as being in trouble. But in reality, we, the human species, are the ones in grave danger.* (Woodley, 23)

The Lakota way of life is vastly different from my own, yet it inspires me to reflect deeply and learn from their wisdom. It shows me that there is another way. It prompts me to wonder what I might learn from the Lakota people and take home to my corner in West Charlotte.

For a while now, I have been working on a series of maps: a map of the neighborhood, a map of myself, and a map of the healing elements I find there.

Here's how it all got started. On a large tabletop, I laid out an unstretched canvas and sketched a map of the neighborhood. I appointed certain symbols and colors to represent things on the map. Daily walking routes are marked with dashes. The color Blue represents a significant place, yellow represents significant people, green represents healing elements like particular plants that make me feel alive, a reddish orange represents my own sense of pain in a place, and fuchsia represents loss. With paint and water, I wash these entities onto the map.

I cut each one out one by one and use paper, cloth, and color to mark the map with houses, structures, and memory. After each block is complete, I sew the block back into the map. Each stitch is an effort to hold it all together, to remain connected, and to repair wounds. Block by Block, story by story, place by place, person by person, I mark memory and time and change into the map.

Like the map of Lakota Star Knowledge, the map I create defies the laws of gravity and time. From where I stand on the map, I have one foot on Tuckaseegee Road and one foot in the murky depths of loss. In my line of sight is an invisible memory of what once was and also a sign of what's coming- healing growing from the soil.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

I am standing at an intersection on the map, and I am the map itself. Parts of me are connected across time to places in the past, the soil of my upbringing, and the elements that shaped me.

This map draws a line of relationship between the corner, the clover, the conversations, the catalpa, and me.

In this map making practice, there is a depth of knowledge here that I am discovering... a deep knowing that grows from a long abiding with land and people and cosmos, developing a familiarity, kindredness, and relationship to a place. I am only skimming the surface. I feel immense gratitude for what I am learning of the story of God's Creation on Tuckaseegee Rd.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, tells an Anishinaabe Creation story in her book [Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants](#)

“It is said that the Creator gathered together the four sacred elements- fire, earth, wind, and water- and breathed life into them to give form to Original Man who was given the name Nanabozho.” The Creator called out the name to the four directions so that the others would know who was coming...

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The Creator gave Nanabozho some tasks: Walk through the world in such a way “That each step is a greeting to Mother Earth,”

He wasn't quite sure yet what that meant. Fortunately, there were other prints upon the earth, many paths to follow, made by all those whose home this already was....

As he explored the land, he learned lessons from the sun, winds, and earth, and beings. Then, he was given new work: to learn the names of all the beings. He watched them carefully to see how they lived and spoke with them to learn what gifts they carried in order to discern their true names. He began to feel more at home and was not lonely anymore when he could call others by name and they called out to him when he passed.

Do you know the names of the plants and animals around you? Don't feel bad if you don't. Most people don't. It might feel a little silly at first, but maybe try it. Hello Crepe Myrtle, Hi Willow Oak, how are you doing, Nandina? How's it hanging, possum?

—

‘The first human, Nanabozho, did not know his parentage or his origins- only that he was set down into a fully peopled world of plants and animals, winds, and water... Before he arrived, the world was all here, in balance and harmony, each one fulfilling their purpose in the Creation.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

He understood that this was not the “new World,” but one that was ancient before he came... Nanabozho did his best with the Instructions he was given and tried to become native to his new home.”

What do you think when you hear the story, especially one that sounds so familiar and kin to our own Creation story? Is the way of Nanabozho, or Adam, or Eve, is their way of knowing and relating to God and Creation possible for us too? Is it possible for non-indigenous people to defy the laws we have been taught?

Is it possible for settler society to become so familiar with land, sky, and spirit that we, by way of life and spirituality, forsake old dogmas in exchange for a sacred way? Is it possible for us to become native to this place?

Robin Wall Kimmerer writes,

“Against the backdrop of [American Settler Colonial] history, an invitation to settler society to become *indigenous* to place feels like a free ticket to a housebreaking party. It could be read as an open invitation to take what little is left. Can settlers be trusted to follow Nanabozho, to walk so that ‘each step is a greeting to Mother Earth?’”

Kimmerer gives us a new name to learn, a teacher we can glean from.

The **Plantain**-

the low-lying broad leaf plant, some of us might call a weed, we may at this very moment be trying to get rid of in our lawns- the Plantain is not indigenous to US land. It was brought over on the shoes of the first settlers and traveled with them across the land. Unlike many invasive non-native plants- like kudzu, Plantains do not take over, they coexist within their ecosystems, they provide medicinal benefits as well.

- Plantains are so well integrated that we think of it as native.
- It even has earned a new name bestowed by botanists for plants that have become our own. Plantain is not indigenous but ‘naturalized.’

Look at the map and you’ll see Plantain at the corner of Tuckaseegee and Parkway, some more at the bus stop, and the park, and down by the coffee shop. On my walk, I pass it by,

Good morning, Plantain! Good morning! Can you keep teaching me your wise lessons? I want to live in a sacred way with you and God’s Creation. Show me how to be so integrated and beneficial that I may live a new way of life, to be given a new name. Show me how to become naturalized to this place.”

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MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Until recently, I've never put myself into my artwork. My pieces have been almost always pointing away from me towards something else, someone else. However, as I was working on the map, I began to realize just how much of myself was incorporated in the map making... I was marking my own experiences, my own memories of this place, my own relationships.

And so, I decided to experiment with incorporating myself into my art. I drew self-portraits and then, using the same map legend, I began to mark where on my body I carry significant people. I began to mark where on my body I sense significant places.

Where do I receive healing resource and salve. Where is there pain? Where is there loss? With paint and water, I washed these entities onto myself.

Green washes over me for the resources that feed me, blue for the places that quench my thirst and fill my spirit, yellow for the ancestors who lie in this ground for the children who play in the soil. Fuchsia for the ways I have strived to take care of the land as if our lives depend on it.

Imagine if we were each to create a map of our places and also of ourselves. Now, imagine we sew this map stitch by stitch until the map begins to take the shape of all of Mecklenburg County, of North Carolina and maybe even further.

In Western North Carolina, the mountains would be washed with the reddish hue of erosion, flooding, of pain, the pink hue of grief and loss. Our homeplaces and home churches may be washed with yellow for significant people we love or have loved. Places like 2nd ward in Uptown Charlotte would be washed with loss from urban renewal.

Where are the places on your map shaded with silenced stories, ones of pain, violence, or suffering? Which ones would be washed with tones of over consumption or greed? What places on your map would be tinged with hues of poverty?

The hue of Grief and Loss is bold and prevalent. Bearing witness to economic oppression, exploitation, and unjust disparities leaves unhealed wounds and scars on the neighborhood and its inhabitants, including me.

Becoming naturalized to place means not turning our gaze. Full inhabitants within God's Ecosystem, daily walking the land "as if each step is a greeting to Mother Earth", we can no longer be blind or immune to what is wrong, wounded, or scarred.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Even though it is hard, even as we are losing ground, even though the wounds we've inflicted on others are still fresh, even though scars we bear on our own bodies and land are still tender, it is a necessary and sacred journey to become naturalized to place.

Becoming naturalized to place, walking on the earth as if each step is a greeting to Mother Earth, discovering and rediscovering our connection to Creation and to God is **holy and lifelong work.**

By attuning our minds and bodies to God's presence, our surroundings, our inner thoughts, and the world around us, we begin to sense the interplay and interdependence between ourselves and the world.

This realization **informs our values and actions.** When we grow a holistic understanding of our relationship with God and Creation, our values shift toward the good of God's whole creation.

The Spiritual Practice of becoming Naturalized to Place **gives us inner strength and fortifies our network of mutual care.** The practice is a healing salve, community builder, endurance strengthener, and resource for change.

Making connection **sparks liberatory imagination.** God's Spirit breathes new imagination, introducing us to healing resources we weren't aware of and possibilities of repair we never pictured.

Ecologist, Wes Jackson, states **"Becoming** native or naturalized to one's place means making everything from our domestic livestock to our domesticated plants native too. And this is a very long process."

It is a long process to connect the groceries we buy, to the farmer who grew them, to the bank we use, to the workers' wages, to the fossil fuels, to our gut health, to our life expectancy, to the life expectancy of another.

It is a long process to connect the map of my body, to the map of yours, to the map of my neighborhood, to the map of the badlands, to the map of the Lakota stars.

It is a long process to connect the fiery dust in the universe, to the dust breathed into life, to the dust in our lungs, to the dust at our feet.

It is a long process to connect the story of the Anishinaabe people, to the ancient story of Adam, to our story.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

It is a long journey from Myers Park to my neighborhood on the West Side, it is a long journey from the shores of the Atlantic to the shores of Gaza, it is a long distance from the plantain to the cypress, from the olive tree to the crepe myrtle,

It is a long line to draw from the stars of the universe to the streets of our cities. But I can see it on the map. There is a way toward sacred connection.

The Lakota have a saying, “What is on the earth is in the stars, and what is in the stars is on the earth,”

Our faith has a similar one, “On earth as it is in Heaven.”

With our land, with our bodies, with our lives, and with all of creation, may it be so. May it be so.

Benediction:

Try it. As you take steps into our day, may each one be a greeting to Mother Earth. Hello tulip poplar, thank you falling leaves, hello writing spider, hello sky, thank you stars, I love you neighbor, we praise you, O God. Go in peace.