

# 06/06/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

## VBS BLESSING

Invite all who are helping with VBS this week to come forward and stand here, in the front for a time of prayer and blessing. While they're coming, there's a short video clip about the curriculum that will be used.

Thank you, God, for each of these people – and for those who are helping but are not able to be here this morning. You have gifted each one and given them willing hearts for the special ways they will be interacting with the children this week at Vacation Bible School. Thank you for these gifts and the willingness to use them. Thank you for the hours of thought and prayer and work and preparation that have already been given. May each of the leaders and helpers be energized and enthused by the opportunities that lie ahead. Bless them with wisdom, with patience, with joy, with the gentle guidance that the children will need. And God we especially ask for your blessing on the children who will come. We ask for your presence and love to surround each one as they learn about Jesus and how to live with him and follow him in their lives. We offer our prayers in his name. Amen.

## MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

O God, as the psalmists and the poets have said for millennia, you show us your creativity and your love in the beauty of the earth. From the dawn of your creation til now you have breathed your spirit into humanity, you have continued to create and name it good. You take joy in us – and in all your creation, and we are humbled and grateful. We want to reflect your love and creativity in the world, to co-create with you in bringing your kingdom here to earth, as it is in heaven. We pray for open hearts and minds, for wisdom and thoughtfulness, for courage and patience as we try to follow the examples of Jesus in our lives.

God of all love, we confess that there is pain within the beauty of this world. There is the pain and destruction of war and fear as humanity hurts each other and your earth with the weapons of greed and hate, the lust for power and wealth, the inability and unwillingness to speak gently and listen deeply to one another, the ways we are tempted to jump so quickly to judgment and frustration. We want the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts to be acceptable and lovely to you.

We pray for Maryanne and Evan. The pain that they are experiencing is excruciating, disorienting. Come to them and their families with love, with comfort, with the assurance that you are with them. Help us, as their community of faith, to know how to come around them and uphold them, to carry them in this time of grief. We pray especially for Jillian, Maryann's niece, as she heals in her body and her mind and soul. Rest your power of healing on her and be with the doctors, the counselors, her family and all who are part of her journey. We pray for Amanda and Braxton Church and Amanda's cousin, as they travel to Boston. Grant them safety. We pray for Kelcey and Natalie as they remain here at home this week. Strengthen the bonds of love in this family as they work with one another, with you, God, and with all the doctors and care-givers. Bless them with your presence and peace this week and in the weeks to come.

We pray for others in our church family and broader community whose needs you know. Be with those who are struggling with finances, with medical or other health-related issues, with broken or difficult relationships, with questions that seem to have no answers. Be with those who work the ground as they wait now for fields to dry, for grain to ripen, bless their work.

Be with those in positions of leadership, God – leaders in the church, locally and more broadly. Be with leaders in our government, locally and more broadly. May they be equipped and willing to bear the responsibility of their positions of concern for those in their care. May each one of us embrace the leadership role you have given us – in our own lives, in our homes and families and communities. Help us to remember that we are all bound to one another, and bound to you by our common faith. Help us to live by the prayer that Jesus taught us... Our Father, who art in heaven...

### PRAYER OF DEDICATION – PASTOR LOIS

You are the source, God. You are the giver of all good gifts, all that we have and all that we are. We humbly offer back to you a token of our gratitude. With full hearts we ask you to receive and bless our gifts of money, of time, of energy and all of the resources with which you have blessed us. For you are the source, God. Amen.

Sermon  
Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church  
Goessel, KS  
June 6, 2021 (remote)  
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“Soil Stories. God Stories.”

Good morning, Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church! It is a privilege and a pleasure to join you this morning. I lament that I cannot be with you in person, even as I am grateful for the technology that makes this connection possible.

I’m particularly grateful to Renae for reaching out in the first place. I’m also grateful to Lois and Delton for helping with the particulars and the technology.

I begin with some confessions: First, if you’re curious about the setting around me, I am recording this message at the Farminary at Princeton Seminary where I work. Unconventional, I know. I hope it all makes sense in the end.

Second confession: As I understand it, my dear, old friend Eric Schrag just introduced me, and I have no idea what he said. I fear the scope of his honesty. Life is full of risks.

My title this morning is “Soil Stories. God Stories,” and I want to spend some time sharing [wait for it] soil stories and God stories. I hope something here might be an encouragement to you. As we continue, Let us pray.

O God. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer, our Creator and Friend. Amen.

As some of you know, I grew up on a farm just east of Kingman. Although dad had to quit farming in 1985, we stayed on the home place and leased out the ground. When I wasn’t at Camp Mennoscah, I spent summers in high school and college working for local farmers. I spent at least one semester at Bethel milking cows part-time with Jim and Bruce Schmidt.

After Bethel, Janel and I married, and then moved to the eastern shore of Maryland where I served as a youth pastor at Holly Grove Mennonite Church. We grew to love Maryland, the Chesapeake Bay, Maryland Blue Crabs, and a community that taught us much about generosity and being a good neighbor. Our eldest, Joshua, was born there.

After six wonderful years in Maryland, we packed up and headed back west because of a unique opportunity to return to Kansas and farm. This quickly became a season of intense vocational discernment. Although something about farming connected to a place deep in my soul, I simply could not shake a sense of call to ministry. So after two short years which included the birth of our daughter, Jenna, we packed up again and moved to Princeton, NJ, in 2007 so I could begin studies at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Initially, I enrolled in a two-year master of arts degree, but soon decided to transfer to the three-year MDiv program. This led to PhD studies in practical theology.

(By now, you see who the true saint is in this story. Janel thought she was moving to New Jersey so I could be a student for 21 months. I ended up being a student for eight years. And we still haven't left. God bless Janel.)

At any rate, during my second year in the master's program, a friend of mine learned that I had been farming prior to seminary. He pulled me aside and said, "Hey, I have a wild idea. I think we should integrate fully accredited theological education with small-scale farming."

I thought, "Well, that's an interesting idea," but it was just that, an idea, and one that reached well beyond my own vocational or theological imagination.

Nonetheless, a seed had been planted. This idea of integrating seminary and farming became favored conversation with friends and colleagues. After dinner or while watching kids at the seminary playground, the idea would come up... "Imagine learning the Parable of the Sower

while actually sowing seeds. Imagine discussing our Doctrines of Creation...while in creation. Imagine contemplating Jesus's command to feed the hungry while growing food."

Seminary + Farming. Farming + Seminary. During one such conversation, a fellow seminarian just blurted it out, "You mean, a Farminary?!"

But it was still just an idea.

Fast forward to the spring of 2013. I was in the dissertation phase of my doctoral program when I had a magical, mystical, terrifying moment realizing that I could not, in fact, be a student forever. My student days were numbered, and we would need to figure out how to feed the children when it was over...by this time we had three. Isaac was born in 2009.

About this time, a mentor of mine was coming to town for a conference, so I called him up. I said, "Mark, we gotta grab coffee when you come to town so you can tell me what to do with my life."

When Mark and I finally sat down for coffee, his notion of helping me with vocational discernment began with an unexpected question. He asked, "Nate, what's your dream?"

This seemed a fruitless question, but I played along. I said, "Well, here's an outlandish dream..." And I outlined the whole Farminary idea for him.

He didn't miss a beat. He looked me in the eye and said, "Let's do it."

I said, "Excuse me?"

And Mark said, "Look, this is an idea that's time has come. If you're willing to work at this, something can come of it."

This was a pivotal moment. Someone important to me took the idea seriously and was willing to work on it with me. We developed a plan: I researched. I wrote about the idea. I connected with others.

A major turning point occurred in the spring of 2014. By this time, the administration of Princeton Seminary had heard of the idea, but were a bit unsure what to do with it. They were curious, but it seemed like a stretch.

Then, in April of 2014 I received an invitation to meet with Dr. Craig Barnes, the seminary's president. I walked into his office to find a property survey unrolled across his desk. He looked at me while gesturing at the survey and said, "So it turns out, we already own a farm. Will this work?"

The seminary purchased a 21-acre farm in 2010 and it sat just over two miles from the main campus.

This was a substantial turning point. When the seminary realized it had the Farminary idea and "Oh by the way, we already own a farm," it proceeded to do what church institutions do when they start taking ideas seriously. It was time to form a committee.

This committee worked for about a year to assess the viability of the concept. Then in the spring of 2015, I taught a pilot course here at the farm, defended my dissertation, and graduated. In the midst of that, the seminary decided they would go for it.

I graduated in May of 2015, then began as Director of the Farminary that July. We've been working to integrate farming and seminary ever since. Seminary courses are offered at the farm every semester. These courses involve traditional seminary things like reading, writing, and wrestling with challenging ideas. We reflect on who God is and what God is up to in the world and in our lives. We also care for the gardens and livestock. We feed and water. We tend. We plant, we weed, we harvest. We regularly fail. Sometimes we feast.

Faculty, students, the broader community: we are all learning to embrace soil, plants, and animals as teachers. They teach us about life and death. They teach us about ourselves. They teach us about creation. They teach us about the Creator.

[PAUSE]

That's my story. It's still being written, still unfolding, but it's my story. It's a soil story. It's a God story.

### **Returning to our Roots**

Why do I tell you this story? Yes, Lois suggested I might talk about the Farminary, but I wonder if something more could be at stake here.

This might sound outlandish, but at some deep level, I wonder if you can relate. Maybe not to my life lived unexpectedly on the east coast or to my seemingly endless years in school, but rather to that part of my story that longs for a deep connection between Christian faith and life lived in intimate connection with the land, soil, and a particular place.

I'm slowly learning that the story of God's love for the world has always been a soil story. From the very beginning – a soil story. When God creates the first human in Genesis 2, when God decides to form that first human being, the first thing God reaches for is a handful of soil – rich, fertile soil. And you recall what God does with that soil, right? God does a very farmer thing. A very gardener thing. God draws the soil right to God's face and breathes. [TAKE A BREATH!] And somehow in the divine grace that mixes soil and God's breath, the first human, the first soil creature, comes to life.

As the Genesis 2 story continues, God scoops up that same soil to form plant and animal life. Plants, animals, and humans (according to this story) all share this in common. All formed by God from the fertile soil of the ground.

It's always been there in Scripture. In many ways, it's always been there in my life. I have simply been a little slow to recognize it.

God drawing life from the soil.

Did you ever wonder why?

Why does God do this? Why bring life from the soil in these ways? Well, that's a big question, but my bias is that God forms life from the soil for the same reason any good farmer, rancher, or gardener brings life from the soil. The reason is love. Love of the land. Love of plants and animals. Love of soil. Love of the people born of the soil.

From the very beginning, the story of God's love for the world has always been a soil story.

Some may think this sounds a bit romantic, a bit idealistic. But I suspect a congregation of central Kansas Mennonites knows better. In fact, anyone familiar with soil or love knows better. If we read past Genesis 2, it becomes clear that Scripture knows better, as well. Soil and love are nothing if not messy.

The continuing story in Genesis is not romantic. It is not idealistic. It is, rather, quite vivid in its portrayal of the messiness of reality. Yes, there's this single chapter of a Garden of Eden, but immediately on its heels, things get very, very messy – tragically messy. Family-shattering messy.

Yes, of course, there's Chapter Three: the serpent, the tree, the eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the hiding, God's pursuit of those in hiding, and the subsequent banishment from the original garden. But it only gets worse from there.

In chapter four, siblings. Brothers. One farmer, one rancher. God receives one's gift, but not the other's. Then jealousy. Then murder. And all along, the soil is there.

Cain's invitation to Abel? It's right there in Genesis 4:8. "Come with me out into the field." And God's reckoning with Cain two verses later? "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." From the soil. The same soil that God used to create life now absorbs the blood of death.

From the beginning, our story of faith has been a soil story. And from the beginning, it has been messy.



This, friends, has been part of my long, slow return to the soil...my long, slow return to the soil with God. I've been slow to recognize that the soil story is a God story and the God story is a soil story.

Again, I tell these stories on the outside chance that some at Alexanderwohl might relate. Maybe you – like me - have had your soil stories and your God stories in separate buckets. Maybe you, like me, somewhere along the line lost sight of the possibility that God may yet find us in the field or in the garden.

Or maybe you, like me, have been hesitant to confront the mess that often accompanies our stories of God and the soil. This would be a good time for another confession. I am aware that our soil stories can be places of deep wounding, family conflict, sibling rivalry, struggle between parents and their children...even trauma. It's all there in Genesis. For many of us, it's still there.

It's tempting to turn away from the mess, to pretend it doesn't exist. To stop telling the story at the close of Genesis 2 while things seem to be going well in the garden. But Scripture does not let us off so easy. Scripture is shockingly consistent in telling the messy parts of the story: the fall, Cain & Abel, more family dysfunction than we have time to name, the captivity of God's people in Egypt, the endless struggle of God's people to follow God's guidance, Jesus's betrayal and crucifixion, disagreement and persecution in the early church.

Over and over and over again, Scripture refuses to shy away from the mess.

I happen to think this is really good news. God does not shy away from the mess of our lives. God seeks us as we try to hide from God's presence. God holds us accountable when we try to avoid responsibility. God enters the mess with us.

God enters the mess with us so that we might be healed and so the whole creation might be redeemed.

You see, though I believe that the story of God's love for the world has always been a soil story. And though I recognize that that story has always been messy. I also affirm that the trajectory of the story has always been life, wholeness, and healing.

We've been muddling around in the soil and garden stories in Genesis. Did you ever notice that Scripture ends in something like a garden, as well?

I grew up always imagining heaven as some place way up in the skies. The book of Revelation doesn't always confirm that notion. Revelation 21 runs the other direction. It describes a new heaven, a new earth, and a holy city coming down out of heaven from God. In this image, heaven descends to earth, and perhaps that makes more sense. It certainly aligns better with that ancient prayer that Jesus taught, the one where we pray that God's "kingdom would come and God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven."

As the vision of Christ's ultimate reign continues in Revelation, it culminates in the final chapter – the very last chapter of the bible – with a river, a river that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And "on either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves [...the leaves] are for the healing of the nations."

In the end, we return to where we started. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Garden to garden. But with this assurance...that in the end all will be healed.

In the end, all will be healed. In the end, the whole creation redeemed.

### **But what about now?**

What do I hope you will do after you hear this message? Four things, very briefly:

First, I hope you'll read Scripture with a new or renewed awareness of land, plants, animals and the whole "very good" creation as central, not marginal to God's story of love for the world.

Second, I hope you will express gratitude anew for the times you have known God's presence and healing in the company of God's good creation.

Third, I hope you will dare to explore your own soil stories, and I hope you do so in a way that intentionally invites God into the exploration.

And finally, I hope that when the exploration unveils a mess or a wound – no matter how tragic or traumatic – you will remember God’s faithfulness in pursuing us in the midst of the mess, and remember how our story with God ultimately ends – with nourishment and healing from the tree of life. And I pray you will by God’s grace and goodness know and experience real healing, even now.

May it be so.

Amen.