

07/06/2025

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If We Are Listening... - Service 2 of "Telling a Different Story"

Please pray with me. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to start by thanking Lois for her introduction to this series last week and for providing a solid foundation for us as we consider those who came before us and how we can respect them. Last week, our focus was on a different story, a story of the celebration of past Indigenous voices in the present tense. I think this is a good practice for all of us, but I also want to acknowledge that this kind of work is not always easy. It requires intentionality; deep looks at who we are as a people, how we got to where we are, and how we can respect those who were here before us. Not to mention, this process, at least for our specific situation in the coming weeks, comes with some changes in our routine ways of doing things: the translation of scripture, the style of music, etc. And that's hard, especially when combined with hard conversations related to land loss and the climate crisis, where it can be easy for feelings of guilt to arise, or for blame to be thrown around. We're all learning about this together, working through these thoughts and questions together. Sarah Augustine, in her book *The Land is Not Empty*, which Lois introduced to us last week, writes, "Our work is not easy, but it is profoundly necessary" (230). She's right, it's not easy, but I don't think it's supposed to be. And it is necessary. Luckily, we already have a good advantage in the fact that we have a group of people here, a community to work through these questions and challenges with. So let's try to tackle this necessary work together.

So, who was here before us? That's not a quick question to answer, and it certainly can't be covered in a short morning message, but I'll try my best to lay down some foundational information to work off of. This map, from "Native Land Digital," is a map of the United States with the historical territory of the many indigenous tribes that have occupied its land. It's kind of amazing to look at just how many different tribes there were in the United States alone, but it also shows how important it is to recognize who has come before us. In almost every case, it's not just one group, but many groups of people. So we can further understand the history of our area, the next slide is a zoomed-in version of this map, specifically centered around where we are now. In this image, Goessel is marked with the star, and we can see that many groups have been present just in the Goessel area, including the Kaw, Comanche, Wichita, Osage, and Očhéthi Šakówinj. It's also important to note that the land these tribes called home isn't solely represented by the titles on the map but by the larger area indicated by color. This is why the name Osage isn't visible at this scale. Even a simplified example of land history like this shows just how much life can take place in an area, and why we're called to interact with it and learn from it.

Our main focus scriptures today, from John and Hebrews, relate to this idea. While seemingly separated texts, they seem to be linked by a view of a pre-existent Christ, a view of Jesus as a co-worker of creation. In our first passage, John 1:1-5, we are reading from the very beginning of John's Gospel, where the writer of John is reimagining Jesus' origins in a time before our memory. The beginning of this passage is very recognizable: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." I found myself curious about the language used here and decided to do a bit more diving into the Greek. Capital W "Word" in John 1 comes from the Greek "Logos." This word Logos has multiple meanings in Greek, some common forms being 'something said, a motive, or a computation,' but more notable for our case is the fourth definition, which is more John-specific. This fourth definition refers to the Divine Expression, to Christ the Son, an active part of creation.

We can see this same idea reflected in our other scripture passage for the day in Hebrews. In verse 2, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes, "But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." Again, here is Jesus working in this creation story, a part of a moving, working, living system before any of us had arrived on this earth. Here lies what I think is the clearest connection between our New Testament scriptures and our current dilemma. There are stories that exist in the places that we inhabit before our community's memory of them. Just as John began his Gospel with this story, we are challenged to do the same with the stories of those in this place before us: The Kaw, the Wichita, the Osage, etc. These passages are also reminders that this earth, mindfully created, was formed before we were placed on it.

If any of you are like me, you're probably asking yourself the question: Okay, now what do we do with this information? How do we restore the wrongs that have been done? How do we prevent more harm from being done to Indigenous land and people? And it would be so much easier if there were a simple, one-sentence answer to those questions, but I certainly haven't found one yet. I do, however, think that a one-size-fits-all logic is kind of missing the point anyway. I don't think we can respect and honor those in this place before us by answering questions, but by asking them, and by keeping open hearts and minds as we listen to the response. In his book, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, Randy S. Woodley writes that "Listening is perhaps the best compliment one person can pay to another" (144).

Woodley, a Keetoowah Cherokee himself, continues by writing, "Traditionally, First Nations peoples are taught to listen in all circumstances. If we are listening, we can learn from anyone or anything." Adrian Jacobs Ganosono (Gah-nuh-sun-oh), a member of the Cayuga Nation, is referenced in this book, and calls listening "giving dignity to others." He writes, "There was a man who crossed the great water in a stone canoe. He brought people to a place of making decisions and listening, which dignified listening to one another's stories, and it is an affirmation of that dignity to gain consensus among differing views" (144). I think this idea is vitally

important when attempting to learn from and respect the indigenous groups around us. I think sometimes we're so caught up in trying to answer the questions ourselves that we lose sight of the opportunities right in front of us to listen to others.

Like Lois alluded to last week, I first came across this book in a course in college. I took this course last semester, and for this course, you have class time once a week, for 2 and a half hours from 7 to 9:30 at night. This was mainly a discussion-based class, which meant that to achieve a successful class period with lively discussion, you need, first, students who are willing to engage with one another, and second, everyone has to complete their readings. In my case, we were lucky to have a room full of students willing to do these two things, and I was amazed to see the kinds of discussions we had and the questions we came up with. Also, importantly, the more diverse perspectives we listened to, the more we were able to learn and think critically about the topics we were reading about. I think this idea of coming together and listening to other perspectives can be so powerful, and I figure if we college students can do it, then all of us here can use these practices in our lives as well. I don't think it's a coincidence that I find better connections to both the material and the people in a discussion-based class; it provides more opportunities to listen to other perspectives, instead of only working with what we have in our own heads.

Shalom and the Community of Creation, like I said earlier, was one of the books that we read in that class, and I think it stuck with me more as a result of the inviting discussion we had surrounding it. This book specifically talked a lot about a worldview based around Shalom, and moving away from the extractive logic that has worked its way into our lives.

Sarah Augustine, in her book with Sheri Hostetler, *So We and Our Children May Live*, writes this about extractive logic: "Christian acceptance of extractive logic is rooted in a common Christian narrative that places humanity in a position of dominion over creation" (62). She goes on to argue that modern Christians often support this idea by pointing back to the first account of creation in the Bible, so I figured we could take a look today. In Genesis, we get our first look at the multiple angles available to us for viewership of creation. The accounts of creation present in Genesis 1 and 2 both take a look at the role we have as a part of God's good creation, and our relationship with the other elements of creation surrounding us. While there has been debate in church history about the role and relationship these two passages have with one another, it isn't too hard to see the ways in which someone's interpretation of these passages has the power to influence the way they interact with the world around them.

So let's take a look at these passages. Genesis 1:26 reads, "Then God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'" Augustine's point is rooted in these two words

in the middle of the passage: “have dominion.” Other translations offer an even more dominant tone than this NRSV version, including...rule over (NIV), and reign over (NIT). I want to acknowledge that we all interpret scripture differently, but I also think it is important to keep in mind the various ways this passage can, and perhaps should, be interpreted differently. The phrase “have dominion” in its original Hebrew comes from the word “Radah.”

This word has been translated in a variety of ways, a couple of which I have on screen. It’s easy to see how one could read these definitions and think humans get to be in the driver’s seat. But, in correlation with other creation narratives, and a central message of Shalom, this instruction takes a different meaning. In the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon, they put it this way: “The verb, Radah, carries the central idea of exercising authority or dominion. In the Tanakh, its range runs from benevolent oversight to harsh subjugation. Context, therefore, determines whether the rule is righteous.” So, what is our context in this case? This is the first context we get in the Bible using this Radah word, with an instruction that humans are charged with this task. I think this quote from the Lexicon sums it up the best. “Dominion is not license for exploitation; it is stewardship that reflects God’s own righteous governance.” All that being said, I think Augustine’s point was to say that we should be aware and notice the way we initially interpret these words. Viewing our role here through a role of stewardship, through a shalom lens, opens up a pathway of care and respect for all creation around us.

In Genesis 2’s creation story account, we see humans receiving a different set of directions concerning the creation around them. Highlighted above is Genesis 2:15, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” Notice the actions here: tilling and keeping. Taking care of the environment we’re placed in, tilling and keeping so the land can continue to be as it was before we arrived. This phrase “till and keep” comes from the Hebrew “Abad.” I’ve again written a couple of translations on screen, and here we see a little more easily how this can be connected to stewardship. The Lexicon writers state that this term, Abad, “unites physical toil with stewardship.”

This account of creation, again, instructs us to be a part of a stewarding relationship with the creation around us. An interpretation of these passages through a Shalom lens invites us to be stewards, to be invested in the elements of creation around us, not through a relationship of power over a certain element, but by a search for a common flourishing. Woodley puts it this way: “The promises of Shalom are for the whole of creation. Human beings play a role in seeing that the order is maintained” (36). We play a role, not one of dominance, but one of care. This means acknowledging who has been tilling the land before us, who has established a campground before we pitched our tents. It means working together with the communities we have now and talking about things like this, and maybe even more importantly, listening to the stories being told to us.

Last week, as I was working on this sermon, I decided I would take a stroll around the church to collect my thoughts and maybe develop some new ones. I found myself stopping on the east side of the church, and as I sat on the bench on the North-West side of the playground, I just sat and watched and listened. I heard the sounds of birds, of bugs, of the wind. I saw the swings and the sand and the sky, and I thought of all the stories, of my many connections to this place. Imagine how much more enriched we could be if we talked with the people who were here before us, to ask about their connections to this place, and to listen to what they have to share.

Next Sunday, our focus will be on our faith community's origins, the story of how it is that we are here. Before we focus on our story, my challenge for this upcoming week will be finding opportunities to listen to the stories others have to tell; Others within my community, but maybe especially others outside of my community. It's through these conversations, this work together, that we will find ways to live lives of Shalom, lives the writers of these stories [hold up books] envisioned. Sarah Augustine writes again and again that "We are joined to each other in a system of mutual dependence" (201). For this system to work, it takes mutual interest, shared concern for good. There are people around us working towards this goal, willing to share their stories, stories that will help shape a flourishing community, if we are listening.

I'll close with this statement from Patty Krawec, Anishinaabe and Ukrainian writer and member of the Lac Seul First Nation.

"We teach each other to love this world. Parents and children. Indigenous people and latecomers. We teach each other and work together, that we may yet walk that green pathway, lush with life" (Hostetler 11).

May it be so.