Sense of Place

“Surely the LORD is in this place…”
Genesis 28:16

God’s creation teems with God’s life-sustaining presence. Just as all plants and creatures depend on ecosystems, we as humans depend on a community of human and non-human life. This inter-dependence is not only about survival, but about our self-identity. We create meaning and feel belonging based on our surroundings.

“If you don’t know where you are, you probably don’t know who you are.”1

www.creationjustice.org/place
“Sense of place” is a concept that can be hard to define, yet we recognize it when we feel it. Social scientists and urban planners consider “sense of place” to be related to a strong identity which visitors and residents alike feel deeply when they are in a certain area. This feeling emerges not only from landscapes, flora, fauna, and climate, but also from history, legends, spiritual beliefs, music, architecture, and language.

Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* raises a helpful concept for understanding a sense of place: integral ecology. An integral ecology challenges our assumptions that the natural world is fundamentally separate from elements that humans co-create: cultures, economies, spiritual beliefs, and political systems. Rather, human life is one part of God’s interconnected creation.

In childhood, a *primal landscape* develops as a first impression of a sense of place. The primal landscape is a child’s perception of the surrounding community. It becomes part of lifelong self-identity, and a baseline for later experiences. Adults that have moved away from their home region often experience longing for their primal landscape—be it mountains, desert, forests, or vast meadows. A child’s primal landscape endures into adulthood as a source of spiritual nourishment, nostalgia and comfort.

Reflect: List elements that make up the place you most associate with “home.” Include the built environment, culture, bodies of water, flora, or fauna. How do you fit into this home-place, and how does it influence your spirituality?
WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR SENSE OF PLACE?

For most of human civilization, our survival depended on the provision of local plants, creatures, lands and waters. Culture, belief systems, economy, and political life were deeply tied to local realities. Extensive trade networks, mass migration, and digital media have reshaped our society worldwide.

On any given day in the United States, it is possible to drink coffee from Guatemala, while wearing clothes made in Bangladesh, while sheltered under a roof that was partly manufactured in China. The average U.S. adult devotes approximately ten hours a day to consuming media, spends 87 percent of their time indoors and passes another six percent of their time inside a vehicle. It takes intentional effort to connect with our local human and ecological community.

Reflect: It is a modern spiritual challenge to be truly present in our unique places. What do you know about your home watershed, and what do you want to find out? Check out [www.epa.gov/surf](http://www.epa.gov/surf) and explore.

WATERSHED DWELLERS

The US Geological Survey defines a watershed as the area of land where all of the water that falls in it, and drains off of it, goes to a common outlet. Watersheds can be as small as a footprint, or large enough to encompass all the land that drains water into creeks, rivers, lakes, bays, or oceans.

More than half of our bodies are made of water. Whatever we are in the world, we are living, breathing, walking participants in a watershed.

Waterways expand across the land like the veins in our body. Rivers, streams, springs, and creeks bring life and nourishment for all of God’s living beings. Focusing on our local watershed, its bodies of water, plants, wildlife, and how our human life depend on it gives us a powerful, expansive understanding of our neighbors. Awareness of our surrounding watersheds reminds us that we are deeply connected to our neighbors—both upstream and downstream.

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King

Gardening training, Louisville (KY). Photo credit: Andrew Kang Bartlett. Provided by Presbyterian Hunger Program.
Race, Class, and Place: Do Places Belong to God or Us?

“The question of how one should imagine space is by far one of the most complex questions facing the world today. Space continues to be ever further enclosed inside the economic and political calculations of nation-states and corporations. Yet one imagines space as inseparably bound to how one imagines peoples and their places in the world.”

Willie James Jennings in The Christian Imagination: Theology and Origins of Race

While places encompass all, and should include all peoples as co-inhabitants, places have often been seen as possessions, and inhabitants as objects of conquest. Our relationship with our watershed and its inhabitants is affected by, and has shaped, our understanding of race and ethnicity.

DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY: WHOSE PROMISED LAND?

Popes in the 1400s issued a series of teachings known collectively as the Doctrine of Discovery, which attempted to justify European men’s capture and colonization of lands and waters, as well as subjecting peoples to involuntary conversion to Christianity, enslavement, forced migration, and murder.

The Doctrine of Discovery laid the groundwork for massive upheaval of peoples and places worldwide, as well as racial and economic inequities that persist today. U.S. law continues to cite it as justification to prevent Indigenous peoples from reclaiming their ancestral homelands.

Some Christian communities are repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery in an effort to repent for the Church’s propagation of this sin. By studying and repenting, we can reorient our communities to connect more deeply to our watersheds as well as transform our collective understandings of ownership.

SEGREGATION AND GENTRIFICATION

We are all made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27). Yet, in urban and rural communities alike, persistent separate and unequal systems contribute to racial inequities. Access to

Reflect: Wherever we are, we are almost certainly in a place originally cared for by Indigenous peoples. Do you know about the original caretakers of the lands and waters you love? Identify and learn about federally recognized tribes, and state recognized tribes with whom you currently or recently share a place.
We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”  

Pope Francis, Laudato Si’

the natural world and proximity to toxic sites continue to be key deciding factors for how developers draw dividing lines.  

Intentional government and private sector racial-ethnic discrimination practices implemented over centuries have shaped the sense of place in numerous cities. For example, redlining was once commonplace and now illegal practice of denying services to residents of certain places based on the racial or ethnic composition of those areas. Through gentrification, city developers attract an influx of middle-class or affluent people, meanwhile pricing out working class communities. Gentrification can rapidly dismantle close-knit communities as well as their bedrock institutions, including local congregations.  

Local churches can counteract injustice by proactively serving as agents of community development that respect the history, culture, and full diversity of communities.

SACRIFICE ZONES

As Christians, we believe God created everything good, and that Jesus redeems all of creation. However, in our ecological and social sin, we have tolerated the development of sacrifice zones: places permanently damaged by environmental destruction or economic disinvestment. From blasting off the tops of mountains to leaving behind permanently polluted fracking wastewater ponds, sacrifice zones are commonly found in low-income communities and communities of color. Damage from climate change is becoming an increasingly devastating problem that also hits vulnerable communities hardest.

People who have witnessed degradation of their watersheds over time may experience a phenomenon called landscape amnesia, the gradual and collective forgetting about the rich sense of place that once existed.
Putting It in Practice: Watershed Discipleship

Each watershed invites the church into a unique relationship based on the land, water, and beings that live within. Theologian Ched Meyers calls Christians to watershed discipleship in recognition: that we are in a watershed moment for saving God’s creation, that an incarnational following of Jesus necessarily involves bioregional faith practices, and that discipleship involves not only our human relationships, but also learning from the life-sustaining ways of God’s creation.14

Our Christian vocation of peacemaking and watershed awareness go hand in hand. Theologian Munther Isaac writes, “A church in a particular land exists for the sake of that land and takes her mission agenda from it. The church, in other words, derives much of its purpose from its locale.”15

“Human beings are only tenants in the land, and as such must share the blessings of the land with their neighbors...the land is something to share, not possess.”16

SERMON STARTER

Shalom and the Community of Creation. A biblical understanding of shalom is fundamental to fostering healing necessary for a strong sense of place. Cherokee theologian Randy Woodley terms Indigenous traditional thought on wholeness as the Harmony Way. He writes, “Shalom, like Harmony Way, is made up of numerous notions and values, with the whole being greater than the sum of the parts.”17 This biblical vision of shalom, is acted out through a vocation of conciliation18 defined by justice and seeking well-being for all (2 Corinthians 5:18, Romans 12-16-21, Matthew 5:9).
By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

Psalm 137:1-4, NRSV
Creation Justice Ministries educates, equips, and mobilizes its 38 member communions and denominations, congregations, and individuals to do justice for God’s planet and God’s people. Learn more at www.creationjustice.org

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
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www.pcusa.org/environment

Environmental Ministries works to inspire and equip congregations and presbyteries to work for eco-justice for all of God’s earth.
“Surely the LORD is in this place…”  Genesis 28:16

Land Acknowledgement Statement
As we gather today, we acknowledge that we are on the traditional lands of Indigenous peoples. (Name the tribes on whose land you gather.)
23 We remember that we share this land with other parts of God’s good creation: plants, birds, and animals. (Name native plant, bird, and animal species.)
24 May we be good neighbors.

Call To Worship
Leader: We have come here seeking to worship the God of all Creation.
People: We have come to stand on holy ground!
Leader: We have come to sing God’s praises, as trees and plants sing God’s praise with their blooming. (Name local spring flowers or budding trees.)
People: We have come to sing praises to our Creator!
Leader: We have come to experience the mighty rush of the Spirit like our surrounding flowing waters. (Name local creek(s), river(s) or body of water.)
People: We have come to experience the God of Creation is this sacred space.

Prayer of Confession
Holy God, We confess that for many of us the history of how we came to be here is more complex than we understand. We confess that we have lost our connection to our local habitat—to the names of the birds of the air, and the fish of the waters, and every crawling thing that you have created. We confess that we are a people who have lost our connection to the dirt under our feet. The very substance into which you breathed life. Transform us, O God, and give us roots.

Empower us to discover the history of this sacred place where you have called us. Embolden us to reconcile with all children of God who called this place home, and to honor their care for the land. Help us to learn the seasons of this sacred place—to learn the native flowers and trees, native birds and wildlife. Open our eyes to the seeds that have been sown here for millennia and the intentional care you have taken in crafting our habitat. May we be rooted and grounded in the family of God in our midst. Amen.

Assurance
There is nowhere that we can run to escape God’s love and compassion. In the generous gift of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, we have been forgiven. As Children of God, we are invited into the meaningful work of following faithfully after Jesus here, in this place. Amen.

Benedictory Prayer
In the name of Jesus, who was from Nazareth, we faithfully commit to this sacred place. Go forth to connect more deeply and follow more faithfully—in this place to which God has called us.

Bible Study: Psalm 104
Would you hear Psalm 104 differently if names of birds, creatures, and geological features were ones you recognize from your own watershed? Consider trying it.

Psalm 104 can be read as an ode of gratitude for the abundance of a particular watershed. Psalm 104 proclaims that all creation is made by, and sustained through, God. This aligns with many Indigenous peoples’ understanding of the land as lived with—rather than owned by—individuals.

TAKE ACTION

Keep It Local: Food Justice and Garden Ministries
Locally produced, seasonal foods contribute to a sense of place. In addition to buying local, consider growing local food to share with human neighbors, as well as native plant species that can feed birds and pollinators. Consider composting, too.
www.creationjustice.org/garden

Bless and Care for Water
Water blessings contribute to mindfulness of our watersheds and the sanctity of God’s creation. Orthodox Christians worldwide celebrate the baptism of Jesus by blessing water. Consider organizing a waterway trash cleanup, or posting signs near drains that encourage reverence for God’s gift of water.
Get to know your watershed in your region www.epa.gov/surf
Find water prayer and action resources www.creationjustice.org/water

Connect with Local Species
Identify the flora and fauna of your watershed. Do they need help from creation caretakers to flourish? Plan a BioBlitz to count God’s creations, and consider honoring Endangered Species Day each year on May 18.
www.creationjustice.org/endangered
www.creationjustice.org/creatures

Visit and Protect Our Public Lands and Waters
The United States conserves a rich system of public lands, waters, monuments, and historic sites that profoundly contribute to sense of place. Gather and enjoy the cultural, historical, natural, and spiritual heritage of the area. Two powerful public policies that protect places are the Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Consider writing to Congress to express support for continued use these policies, for the sake of future generations.

Find Your Park www.findyourpark.com
Advocate for Public Lands
www.creationjustice.org/protecting-places

“The earth is for the circle of people. And since the earth is for the whole, no one individual can own any part of it. The earth belongs to the Creator, and is gifted to peoples.” 25 Chief Lawrence Hart (Southern Cheyenne)

25The Earth is a Song Made Visible: A Cheyenne Christian Perspective,” Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry, 155

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