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We Belong to the Earth
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Psalm 24

The film *Nomadland* introduces us to a sub-culture of mostly older adults who for various reasons – primarily economic – have taken to the road. The movie is based on Jessica Bruder’s 2017 non-fiction account of people she met and followed on the road for three years. The “actors” in the film are the actual nomads, giving the movie the feel of a documentary. It’s filmed almost entirely outdoors, in some of America’s most stunning places.

The nomads move around in their vehicles, living in parks, campsites, and parking lots, subsisting on what they can earn in odd jobs. Month after month, year after year, they roll across the land, creating temporary communities, becoming intimate with the wind and rain, the mountains and desert, the “seas and rivers” upon which God founded creation.

It’s a hard life. I suspect the nomads would understand better than many of us from the sheltered convenience of our homes the meaning of the psalmist’s words: The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it. They are in it all the time – the beauty and harshness

of creation – and they know they do not control it, or much else in their lives.

The earth is the Lord's. With that one simple line, the Hebrew poet lays out a basic understanding of creation at odds with how many see the world: life on this beautiful planet is not all about us.

From the beginning, it has always been about the forces that give shape to the cosmos and speak life into being and place us into the wonder of creation. The psalm corrects the hubris of humankind. It reminds us that we are adam, from the Hebrew adamah, meaning ground or earth. We are earthlings, made of dust, be it from the stars or dirt in the fields. And the nomads seem to understand this, as close as they are to the earth.

From the beginning, like everything else on this planet, we have been subject to the forces of nature. We flee hot winds driving wildfires, along with deer and other creatures. We frantically escape rising floodwaters in the subway with the city's rodents. With nesting birds, we, too, watch powerful hurricanes wipe out our homes. Like creatures in search of a better place to live, we hit the road when circumstances require it.

Recent acts of nature have reminded us, in no uncertain terms, that we belong to the earth – and scripture reminds us that the earth belongs to God.

The Bible does not begin with human beings. It is theo-centric, God-centered, not anthropo-centric. It starts with the Creator assembling the primordial ingredients that constitute the earth itself: matter and energy, water and wind, light and heat. Whether through the lens of evolution or the window of scripture, the conclusion is the same: human beings came late onto the scene.

As the ancients tell it in Genesis, before us came “swarms of living creatures...great sea monsters... every winged bird...cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” (Genesis 1:21-22)

It’s important for us not to diminish either the biblical story of creation or scientific accounts of the origin of the earth. Each narrative contains truth, from different angles. Neither can tell the whole story. Science and religion are not mutually exclusive. Both allow for certitude and mystery, the ineffable things beyond our capacity to explain.

Either way, we humans are but a part of something far more expansive than ever we could imagine. The nomads grasp that intuitively, as do others who also do not embrace the false conceit of human control of the natural world.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, author Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Potawatomi nation, says,

“In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top – the

pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation – the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as ‘the younger (siblings) of Creation.’ We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn.”
(Milkweed Editions, 2013; p. 9)

Not unlike the nomads and perhaps some of us, Kimmerer describes how her family used to spend summers canoe camping in the Adirondacks. Every morning she says, her father would rise early and gather the family as the sun was “pulling mist off the lake in long white coils” maybe as on a Minnesota lake. Her father would move through a morning ritual which involved pouring coffee on the ground. “Here’s to the gods of Tahawus,” he would say, referring to a nearby mountain.

“By those words,” Kimmerer writes, “We said, ‘Here we are,’ and I imagined that the land heard us – muttered to itself, ‘Ohh, here are the ones who know how to say thank you.’”

The ceremony, she says, was “a vehicle for belonging – to a family, to a people, and to the land.” (p. 35, 37)

We belong to the earth, but are we among those who say thank you?

We may not be nomads camping our way across the landscape, but we have moments of recognition when we recall our place in the beauty of it all. Anyone who has spent extended time in the

woods or on a lake, in the mountains or a desert or on the ocean shore, or even an afternoon in a city park – this morning on my bike ride in, just after the sun had risen, I saw an older woman walking slowly through the trees in Loring Park, and I thought to myself, there goes a nomad, enjoying the wonder of creation. However, and wherever, it has happened for us, all of us have known the inner rustling of gratitude Kimmerer describes. Deep connection to the earth is there, if we can be still long enough to watch for it.

The worship of God is a vehicle for remembering that we belong to the earth. If we earthlings did nothing more when we gathered each week at Westminster than join the psalmist in declaring, “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,” that would be enough.

We come to join all creation in singing praise to God:

“For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth, over and around us lies.
Lord of all to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise.”

Religious faith has its roots in those places and at those moments when our desire to re-connect to creation is felt most profoundly. In those moments we remember from where we have come, and to whom we belong. That’s why so many of us say we experience God in nature – because we do. I used to resist that comment from church members; I wanted them to experience God here in

the sanctuary. But all of us know what that is, to experience God in nature.

Life on this beautiful planet is not all about us. Humans have the least experience with how to live, Naïve wisdom says, and thus, the most to learn. What will it take for earthlings to learn that from the planet?

As nature follows the course set by its most destructive member, the planet is calling the question. Change in the climate, with its consequences, occurs because we have lost our memory of belonging to the earth. The stewardship of creation was to have taken place not from outside the natural world, by our mastery of technology, but by those who inhabit it along with everything else.

The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it.

We live as if we think we are sovereign over creation, but the earth knows better. It reminds us in every storm, in every rainbow, in every sunrise and earthquake and hurricane, that there are forces beyond our command. In those humbling moments we are placed back into the story, where we belong, as part of it, not beyond it, controlling it. That's when we take our place as stewards of the earth, to do what we can to minimize our impact on creation.

This week the University of Minnesota announced its plan to withdraw its investments in the fossil fuel industry. Macalester College made the same decision earlier this year. Such decisions alone will not solve the climate crisis. Nor will corporate America's commitment to being "carbon neutral," which largely leaves in place the status quo while merely transferring climate-damaging activity to another location on the planet.

(See "Big Oil Wants You to Blame Yourself," NYTimes, 9/5/21)

Nonetheless, these are encouraging signs of an emerging willingness to remember our place in creation, an awakening of our role as stewards of the earth, whether we approach that from a scientific or biblical perspective. Let us hope the awakening not too late.

Near the end of *Nomadland*, Fern, played by Frances McDormand, drives the van in which she's been living to the California coast. She has declined an invitation from another nomad, Dave, to stay with him and his family in a large, beautiful home. Dave had said he didn't think he could ever sleep with a roof over his head again, but the pull of family changed his mind.

Not so for Fern. She slips out of the bed in the house and goes to sleep in her van. The next day she quietly departs. We never learn why Fern cannot leave the nomad life. Maybe it's because she's found a new family on the road. Or because she likes the independence. Or grief over her husband's death won't let her settle.

When she gets to the coast, there's a scene where she walks through a grove of giant coastal redwoods. The trees are enormous beings that seem to welcome her. When she comes to one that has fallen over, she walks its length, slowly and respectfully running her hand along its skin, as if simultaneously mourning and remembering.

I wonder if in that moment she realizes why she had to get back on the road. Living from campsite to campsite, breathing in the mountain air, reveling in the silence of the desert, rejoicing with other nomads around a fire beneath a star-filled sky, she has become acutely aware that she belongs to the earth, and she cannot leave the earth behind again.

Fern has become one of those who has learned to say thank you to the created goodness of the planet. Even in the hardship of life on the road, she has found her place in the beauty of the earth. She belongs.

We will need – all of us – such a spiritual awakening to our oneness with the earth if ever we hope to be good stewards of the planet entrusted to our care.

Two weeks ago, we remembered the first question of the 16th century Heidelberg Catechism; What is your only comfort in life and in death? The answer: that I belong, body and soul, not to myself, but to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.

The Hebrew poet might have added, if asked that question: That I belong, like the wind and rain, like the green growing things and birds soaring in the sky, like the animals scampering across the plains, like the trees in the forest and rocks in the hills, like the fish swarming in the sea, I, too, belong to the earth.

That is my comfort in life and in death.

And the earth belongs to God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.