

July 21, 2019  
Rev. Jane Florence  
Ruah Elohim (Breath of God)  
Psalm 95, Genesis 1:1



The Psalm announces Good News: God is Awesome! Let's celebrate! Sing, make a joyful noise! The psalmist says, look at what God has done. Look at the majestic mountains touching the heavens! Peer into the depths of sea and all manner of life within. See tiny shrimp upon the ocean floor and whales arcing in graceful power. Go to the deserts; feel the sands beneath your feet. Watch the geckos dart across your path. Notice the cactus with dagger thorns and delicate blossoms on the same stem. Journey to the rain forest jungle and see the monkeys swinging overhead, and birds of brilliant color and otters at play and work. Come let us worship. Let us bow down in adoration to the Creator of all that is.

The poet continues that we worship not only Creator but Sustainer God. We are the people of God's pasture, and the sheep of God's hand. Here is the pastoral image of God as Good Shepherd caring, leading, guiding, protecting, guarding the sheep of the flock.

The song remembers the ways in which God sustained and cared for this flock of nomad peoples. God liberated the Hebrews from slavery. God cared in their long journey through wilderness. God provided food, water, guidance, strength even to defeat their enemies. God's people have been called to remember the sustaining and saving acts of God in their lives and in all our histories as we tell them from generation after generation.

Our Puritan ancestors gave thanks for God's hand that kept them alive crossing the sea bringing in them into freedom. They told a story that sounded much like the Israelite story. Africans stolen from their land and shipped to these foreign shores turned suffering into spirituals announcing God's presence even in their plight.

Each one here has a story too. There was a time when God kept you alive and sustained you when it was doubtful that you could sustain yourself. someone helped when you were in a tight spot, a dark space, a difficult time, someone was the hands and feet of God for you. Someone said thing you needed to hear and whispered God's care in your ear. Someone gave you the helping hand or the encouragement to get through. There are even times when God sustained you and me, and we weren't even aware. No doubt we have much to praise, sing and make a joyful noise and give thanks—"kneel before the Lord, our Maker."

The preacher in this psalm announces the Good News, reminding us of the Creating and Sustaining power of God, and our response to give praise, thanksgiving and worship. The singing preacher of Psalm 95 could have said "Amen," sat down, passed the plate after verse seven, and everyone would have said, "nice sermon, preacher." "Amen, preacher. Praise God, preacher, Have a nice week." The congregation and the preacher could have gone home comfy and cozy, feeling good.

That's not what happened. The songwriter added another verse. The preacher cleared her throat and said, 'I'm not done yet. There's more that must be said. I have another point in my sermon outline.' Right then the song just changed; the song of praise changed from major to minor. The festive tempo just slowed to a dirge. The smiling preacher's eyes filled with a plea to their hearts:

"O that today, you would listen to God's voice.  
Harden not your hearts, as your ancestors did."

You'd think the Israelites freed from slavery would be singing God's praises forever, but it didn't take too long until they changed their tune. Their 'thank you's' turned into 'it's hot... I'm hungry.... are we there yet? ... my feet hurt...can we just go back?' Their songs of rejoicing vanished into a song of disobedience, defiance, rebellion, whining and complaining. We have not stopped.

We sing: Praise God for the beauty of the Earth. Praise God for purple mountains majesty. Stand in awe at the intricacy of the human body, the delicacy of a spider web, the power of ocean waves. Praise God, Creator of the Universe. Then our song ends and what do we do? Do all in our power to destroy creation: pollute air and water, strip mine the mountains, deforest the forest, kill off entire species every day, walk with carbon footprints as big as Big Foot.

How can we worship the Creator, and then set about to kill creation? How can we deny our interconnectedness to all living beings, including the earth- while giving easy praise, superficial praise to that which connects us? We have turned from recognition that God saves us throughout our dangerous life voyages, to patting ourselves on the back and saying, "See what I did, all by myself!" We congratulated ourselves for becoming scientifically enlightened, and we decided that those who had gone before us were just superstitious and unenlightened when they spoke of the spirit of the forest and the soul of the earth. We learned of atoms and molecules and strands of DNA yet failed in seeing the Creator who fashioned them.

The psalmist laments our loss. We are a disconnected people; we disconnected from the creation that reveals the Creator and disconnected from the sustaining awareness of God's presence. The preacher says that those who disregard this knowledge of God, Creator & Sustainer, shall not find rest. We do not find rest easily these days. Leiwellyn Vaughan-Lee writes, "We have forgotten the existence of the soul of the earth.. .and because we have forgotten this sacred dimension of creation, we no longer practice the rituals that nourish it... We may not be consciously aware of what is happening, yet many people feel it deep within. There is a primal anxiety beneath the surface of our Western material abundance."<sup>1</sup> There is a primal anxiety beneath the surface, and we feel it.

The psalmist says we must remember. To remember our Creator to see the creation as a sacred text which points us to God. To remember our Sustainer is seeing our stories that point us back to God, for else we will not find the rest our soul desires.

That's what our scriptures do, remind us of sometimes the obvious. The Hebrews begin their story-telling with 'In the beginning' - in the beginning there was God, there was the energy and power of all Creation in Divine Cosmic goodness. and the Wind of God spoke into the swirling chaos and everything found order.

I have often bemoaned the limitations of the English language. While Greek has three words for the various nuances of "Love," English has one. While Hebrew has several words to denote the idea of "forgiveness", our own language lumps it all under one term that often confuses and compounds problems. Most often we find other languages with multiple words compared to once choice in English which leaves me wishing for greater options. However, the reverse is also the case. In Hebrew there is a word " ruah"- the Hebrews knew the word and it's nuances. In English, we translate it with many words. In doing so, we forget that they are all one.

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<sup>1</sup>Leiwellyn Vaughan-Lee. *Spiritual Ecology:The Cry of the Earth.*

The Hebrew word, *ruah*, is translated as air, it is also translated as breath, it is also translated as spirit, it is translated as atmosphere, and we have separated those into dualistic and isolated concepts- where the Hebrews knew them all as one. Ancient Israelites did not separate spirit from matter, or soul from body, or atmospheric air from the respiration of our lungs. All were one. The same air that animated human life is the same breath of all other animal life. All human beings, everyone in this room, everyone around the world with varied shades of skin color and varied privileges all inhale and exhale the same *ruah*. It is the same atmosphere that pushes the clouds across the sky and allows the birds to soar. The same atmosphere that brings life-giving rains to the face of the earth that causes plants to spring forth.

In biblical wisdom, all this, atmospheric winds, animal respirations, producer of living waters, all this stuff of life is directly connected with God's being and God's activity. Air is not regarded as a material element of the natural world empty of divinity. On the contrary *ruah* originates from God, it is God's *ruah*, it is a revelation of God and an indication of God's presence. *Ruah* is sacred and divine. The air we breath is God's breath. Human breath is God's breath. Animal breath is God's breath. The wind is God's breath set loose in creation to partner in sustaining. All of this undermines the notion that one race is superior to another, or that one species is more valuable than another. or that humans are of a totally differ order than the rest of nature. We are one animated by One. Sustained in life by One.

In October of 2016, I was privileged to journey to Peru on an eco-theological seminar. I'll tell you more stories about that sometime. It was a wonderful, daring, thought-provoking challenging journey. to get as much out of the trip as possible, our leaders packed our itinerary tight. We ascended Machu Picchu at dawn and traveled far into the night into the Peruvian amazon. For a week, I averaged less than four hours sleep a night.

it should not have come as a surprise when I became ill upon my return from Peru. The first four days back my brain seemed to be processing slowly; my 'head' just wasn't right. I attributed the fatigue to exhaustion. Finally, by the morning of day five back, I seemed to have slept enough that my brain started working properly. That's when I realized that I was sick. At first I tried to keep going, I wanted to ignore the symptoms my body was sending. I pressed to return to the office and 'normal' work hours, but the respiratory infection and coughing fits forced me to rest longer than I wanted. Then I saw that my body was emulating what I had witnessed of our earth.

Our earth is sick because we have mistreated her, yet we expect her to keep going. We want to ignore the symptoms her body is sending, begging for relief. Symptoms I saw in Peru of our ailing earth:

The cloud forest is changing. It is moving higher. Plants and animals who depend on moisture/ humidity of the cloud forest are moving into other areas too

The animal life of the Amazon feels the stress. South American otters are in danger because their habitat is shrinking and human hunting, deforestation, river pollution, overfishing and tourism<sup>2</sup> has reduced their population making them the rarest otter population in the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John A. Bissonette, p 300.

<sup>3</sup> <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/giant-river-otter/>

The uncontrolled spread of illegal mining has rapidly deforested wide swaths of lowland Amazonian rainforest. Gold mining puts mercury and other toxins in the ground and run off into the water leading to contamination of fish and other animals..<sup>4</sup>

Houses and shops with dirt floors and bare cement structures which have electricity working only from 6 to 10 p.m. in remote stretch of the Madre de Dios have a flat screen tv suspended from the ceiling with the community gathered around watching consumer propaganda of Western culture.

In one week, in one location, at every turn, I could see how our earth is sick because we have mistreated her, yet we expect her to keep going. We want to ignore the symptoms her body is sending, begging for relief as her temperature rises.

God's ruah brings life to the earth and God invites, expects, directs us to protect and restore the integrity of this plant, God's creation, and all that shares the breath of God.

May it be so

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.amazonconservation.org/pdf/gold\\_mining\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.amazonconservation.org/pdf/gold_mining_fact_sheet.pdf)