

GOD IS PRESENT

By Katie Harmon-McLaughlin, *Spiritual Formation Team lead*



"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it..."

—Psalm 24:1

Preparing for childbirth, I was invited to imagine a peaceful, calming space. The image came swiftly. Despite the beautiful places and diverse geographies around the globe that I have been privileged to witness, my mind always returns to one specific location when I need to reconnect with a deeper source of peace and calm. It's an old wooden dock perched beside a small lake at Glenn Wood Hills Campground in Derby, Indiana, USA.

In my imagination, I lay across wooden planks as I did when I was a teenager, and I listen to the water gently lap against the shore as mist hovers and swirls above the water's surface. I haven't been back to that place in ten years, but the image is embedded in my soul.

The geographies that form us are significant. They are more than backgrounds. It is easy to forget that we are creation, kindred creatures of this planet, and our very breath and being is dependent upon the physical places we inhabit. There is an intimacy with space that extends beyond good memories. We are formed physically, psychologically, and spiritually by the landscapes of our lives.

Though the old wooden dock beside the lake is a foundational image in my spiritual life, I do not believe it is more sacred than other places. Earth is earth, and the "earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1). Every space we enter already is charged with the presence of the sacred. There is no place that is not already sacred, because there is no place we can go where God is not already present. I can honor my relationship with an important place in my life while remaining open to the sacredness of all other places.

The austere spirituality of the desert bears witness to the radical notion that God is present even in seemingly empty and barren places. Even here, the desert mystics proclaim, God can be found. Sometimes it takes a new landscape to discover God in a new way. Ask anyone who has moved from one region to another—differences in seasons throw off our rhythms. Changes in topography and terrain can disorient or delight. It takes time to settle into new birdcalls and trees. We don't realize how integrally the spaces that hold our lives become part of the very marrow of our identity.

It is profound to me that the physical spaces and geographies we encounter speak to our souls so powerfully of home or distance, of presence or absence, of comfort or challenge. The geography of a place can tell us a lot about the condition of our own souls, and we often use landscape language to attempt to articulate our inner realities.

Joan Sauro writes that "we share not only a vast outer world but also a precious inner one that is its reflection. If you will look to this inner world of yours, gently and without haste, you too will discover

widths and depths remarkably like the outer, natural earth. ...This is your inner earth, its slopes and plateaus, its reds, greens, pinks, deep down browns, and greys. You are jagged and smooth to touch, filled with lights and shadows, life and death. You are vast, complicated, unfinished, and changing" (Joan Sauro, C.S.J., *The Whole Earth Meditation*, Weavings, VI:6).

The scriptures are plentiful with images of the natural world articulating the realities of the inner world, such as Psalm 63:1: "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

The author of Jeremiah uses connection to the land to describe a spiritual life rooted deeply in God: "They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:8).

Sacredness of creation is an inner and outer reality. It is a profound realization. Everywhere we go, the Spirit is already present and our souls are part of that sacred creation too. When I pause long enough to consider the "vast, complicated, unfinished, and changing" nature of my own inner terrain, I am moved to curiosity about the inner landscapes of others as well. We are all walking around this sacred world with worlds within us, depths and heights unexplored. How do our interactions with one another change when we realize that there is much more to each person than our perceptions and assumptions?

When we awaken to the beauty, the sacredness, the more-ness of a person or place, the impulse to care increases. "When we realize something other than ourselves is really real, that it suffers like we do and sings out its name like we do, compassion and justice naturally arise" (Wendy Farley, *Beguiled by Beauty: Cultivating a Life of Contemplation and Compassion*, page 56).

Moments of spiritual awakening are often fleeting rather than sustained. My prayer is often a plea for the kind of life I want to live: "Help me stay awake a little longer!" Each moment of truly seeing the sacredness around and within ourselves forms us and stretches our perception. We cultivate a capacity to see again and to act with compassion and justice toward what we see.

The sacred spaces in our lives are an important part of awakening to the presence of God in all places and in every iota of creation. They are more than backgrounds. God became more real to me as I laid on my belly on the wooden dock and watched the mist. The mist swirling above the waters around me stirred awareness of the Spirit hovering within me. But the divine presence was not contained there. It was the beginning of a way of seeing that has accompanied me ever since. Every place, every person is already filled with the presence of God.

