Easter 6C – Rogation Sunday
May 25, 2025
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Today's reading from Revelation is from the very final chapter of the Bible, where God's New Jerusalem is laid out as a beautiful vision for our future, filled with hope about what we might look forward to. But honestly, when I look at where we are right now, with temperatures rising and species becoming extinct and low expectations that our leaders might be making plans to save us from all that…things just don't seem very hopeful. And yet, here is the author John, describing a vision of a future time, some would say the end of times, that looks much like the planet did when God created it…harmony between humans and creatures and a gracious plenty for all. Civilization and nature exist together and there is the utter peace that Jesus promises the disciples in our Gospel reading this morning. How many of us today really have hope for that beautiful vision laid out in the final words of the Bible, this vision of a restored Garden of Eden?

Meanwhile, I sure do love this vision of the Earth, with crystal flowing waters, the tree of life with all kinds of fruit hanging from its branches, and the leaves of the tree healing all of the nations. That is a vision worth hanging onto, despite the despair that I often feel. I want to see the Earth as a revelation of God…as something that reveals God…and this vision of the future. But how…how do I do that given what I read and hear every day?

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Today is also known as Rogation Sunday, an ancient observation that dates back to the 5th century when, following a period of natural disasters, churches asked for blessings on the growth of crops.

Rogation Sunday and the rogation days that follow, leading up to the Ascension on Thursday, were traditionally a time for what became known as "beating the bounds" or

walking the boundaries of the parish and blessing the land and the workers. Kind of checking on the property all the way to the edges and praying for the harvest to come. It was pretty much an agrarian world when this tradition started, but as time went by, they began blessing all commerce as well. Today we are going to do a bit of that by meeting after the service at the parish house and walking around the property, saying a few prayers as we go. It will be a fun way for people to see parts of Redeemer that they don't often take the time to see!

But the more I thought about Rogationtide as a time to check the boundaries of the church and make sure that things were secure, the more I thought about boundaries and ownership and a way of seeing that is exclusive and "arms around" as owners. Even when you think of it as us being stewards, we still see ourselves as in control of the property. It is a resource for us, and we are in charge and decide what happens to it.

What if we looked at it a little differently? What if we see ourselves as in *communion with* the property? We humans are simply one part of God's creation and we have our own unique part to play, just as the land does. Is there a way to "listen" to the land to find out what part it is supposed to play? What are we in communion with the land to *do* for advancement of the Kingdom of God…to arrive at the New Jerusalem? What part do we and the land *together* play in arriving at that marvelous City with crystal waters and fruit on every tree that benefits every creature for the common good?

So I started to think about ways that we have engaged with the land here at Redeemer over these past 40+ years. And there is quite a litany…from worship to education to service to play. Rather than "beating the bounds" of the property, what might it look like to review our interactions with the land and see (1) what stories it has to tell us and (2) what might we *then* be called to do *with* this property that we tend and keep? Rather than looking at the property as an inanimate "other" that we simply use as a resource,

what does it look like to consider this property as our brother or sister in ministry. What can we do together?

We have never been “separate” from this land, but the land has defined us…as Redeemer. We are the westernmost church in the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. We are that hippie church out in West Mobile that is so laid back and charismatic. We are the church that has refused to pave over our property to put in a “proper” parking lot, instead choosing to park among the trees. We are the church that has learned to exist with a very steep grade, always struggling against the erosion into Cody Road and losing parking lot gravel to the woods. We are the church that has had chickens roaming the property, a well installed to water the grounds, outdoor areas for worship, stations of the cross, a meditation labyrinth; a place for internment of ashes, both human and pets; and gardens…a community food garden, flower gardens, including a host of lilies throughout the property, some of which remain to this day. At one time we had an extensive pollinator garden close to the labyrinth, an herb garden outside the kitchen door, we have fruit trees…an “orchard” if you will…along the connecting walkway. Roughly a quarter of our 8-acre property is covered in woods, with a stream running through it. We once installed a 9-hole disc golf course in those woods, and when all of the goals were stolen, the youth used the path that had been cleared to host a Haunted Woods for a couple of Halloweens.

It’s been alleged that someone was growing marijuana in the woods for a time! In conjunction with the community garden, we held workshops on square-foot gardening, composting, beekeeping and canning preserves and jellies. We have held birding workshops and Easter egg hunts and 12th Night ceremonies where we had huge bonfires with all of our Christmas trees. There have been not one, but two playgrounds built on the property over time. At one time we built a very large grill pit on the northwest corner of the property and held overnight grilling sessions to prepare chickens for the May Extravaganza, which was also held on the grounds. We have hosted movie nights on the labyrinth, followed by a sleepover for those willing to sleep in the ground out

there. The teenagers got our grounds certified as a wildlife habitat through the National Wildlife Federation. I am certain that I am forgetting other projects held on our grounds over the years, but you get the point…a tremendous amount of ministry has been done on and with the grounds of Redeemer.

But I wonder, what is God asking of both us and the land at this time? How are we being called into ministry with this remarkable property? What does that discernment process even look like? We discussed this a little bit when we held the creation care study last fall and a follow-up book study. Perhaps we are called to try to address the way that our current environmental situation leaves us feeling hopeless. Maybe this land offers opportunities for services of lament and reconciliation and connection with nature. Maybe we should plant an actual orchard at the bottom of the hill to offer food through our food pantry. We have certainly tried a lot of different things over the years, but maybe it's time to make an effort to discern *with* the land what we are called to do.

And that's where this Rogation service comes into play. It's hard to do ministry with others in creation if we don't spend time getting to know them. How many of us actually spend time with the land to try to understand what that might look like in practice. I know that this has gotten a little woo-woo for some of us, and if I'm honest, that includes myself, but how can we know if we don't try to listen…to be in communion…with all of Redeemer?

I truly hope that many of you will join us for this walk around the property. We will meet right after the service at the front of the parish house and will visit stations on the west end of the property first. Then, for those who are up for it, we will walk through the woods. It is not a neatly cleared path, but there is a path of sorts, so if you have good shoes you can certainly make it. And we will finish up at the back door of the parish house and join the others for snack.

At the beginning of this sermon, I wondered aloud “how do I hold on to that glorious vision of the Earth in Revelation, given what I read every day?” How do I address the feelings of hopelessness and despair when I think about the direction the planet is going? I must remember that “We aren’t tasked with preparing the entire world for God’s return. We tend the garden of our parish, not the entire world. Our parish is the place, the ground, the dirt, where we prepare for the New Jerusalem.”[1]

I leave you with this prayer from the Rev. Barbara Taylor Brown, which she used in one of her Rogation sermons:

“My prayer for each of you during these Rogation Days is that you will run into some tree, some body of water, some raindrop or blade of grass that shouts your name out loud, and that you will have the good sense to go over and introduce yourself – in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”

Amen.

[1] https://anglicancompass.com/rogation-days/

[2] “Rest for the Land,” Earth and Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet, edited by David Rhoads, © 2007