



Second Presbyterian Church (St. Louis, MO) church garden. Photo credit: Don Cochran. Provided by Presbyterian Hunger Program.

# 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.”<sup>1</sup>**

[www.creationjustice.org/place](http://www.creationjustice.org/place)



Photo credit: Red Uniendos Manos Peru. Provided by Presbyterian Hunger Program.

**“We won’t save a place we don’t love; we won’t love a place we don’t know; and we can’t know a place we haven’t learned.”** Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum’s comments to the 1968 general assembly of the International Union for Conservation of Nature

### WHAT IS “SENSE OF 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?*

**“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”<sup>5</sup>** Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King

## 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<sup>2</sup>, spends 87 percent of their time indoors and passes another six percent of their time inside a vehicle.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

More than half of our bodies are made of water. Wherever 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.



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.”**<sup>6</sup> 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 Chaco region. Photo credit: Paul Jeffrey. Provided by Presbyterian Hunger Program.

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.<sup>7</sup>

Some Christian communities are repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery in an effort to repent for the Church’s propagation of this sin.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> Do you know about the original caretakers of the lands and waters you love? Identify and learn about federally recognized tribes,<sup>10</sup> and state recognized tribes with whom you currently or recently share a place.<sup>11</sup>*



The Chaco region. Photo credit: Paul Jeffrey. Provided by Presbyterian Hunger Program.

**“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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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."<sup>15</sup>



Photo credit: Ferncliff Camp (AR). Provided by Presbyterian Hunger Program.

**"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."<sup>16</sup>**



Photo credit: Asociacion Fenix (Nicaragua). Provided by Presbyterian Hunger Program.

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## 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."<sup>17</sup> This biblical vision of shalom, is acted out through a vocation of conciliation<sup>18</sup> defined by justice and seeking well-being for all (2 Corinthians 5:18, Romans 12-16-21, Matthew 5:9).



Dodging puddles during “Breakup” (When Winter Ice Melt) in Shishmaref, Alaska. Photo by Rachel Rivera, originally appeared in Sierra Magazine

# Exile from Shishmaref, Alaska<sup>19</sup>

Shishmaref is a fishing village in Alaska that is on an island only 3 miles long and a quarter-mile wide in the Chuckchi Sea, just north of the Bering Strait. The village has 560 residents and one church, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation. The Rev. Thomas Richter is the pastor. It’s the type of place where nothing seems to change; for generations, the people have been hunting and fishing for food like their ancestors. But slowly, and without the consent of the Alaskan Native Inupiaqs who live in Shishmaref, the island has been changing.

“Over the past 35 years, we’ve lost 2,500 to 3,000 feet of land to coastal erosion,” said 20-year-old Shishmaref native Esau Sinnok in a letter to the U.S. Department of Interior. “In the past 15 years, we had to move 13 houses—including my dear grandma Edna’s house—from one end of the island to the other because of this loss of land. Within the next two decades, the whole island will erode completely.”<sup>20</sup>

On Aug. 16, 2016, by a narrow majority of 11 votes, the residents of Shishmaref decided to move the village inland after homes began falling into the sea due to land erosion from the lack of barrier ice.

According to the United Nations, an estimated one person every second has been displaced by a natural disaster

since 2009.<sup>21</sup> From droughts in Somalia to floods in Pakistan and Superstorm Sandy in the United States, there isn’t a part of the world that hasn’t been affected by extreme weather events and shifting climate.

For Sinnok in Shishmaref, climate change is very real. “Climate change is affecting the Arctic more than other places in the world,” Sinnok said. “It is not just a political issue to me. It’s my future.”<sup>22</sup>

**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



Photo credit: Collen Earp. Provided by Presbyterian Hunger Program.

- <sup>1</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Vintage Books, 1982, p. 564.
- <sup>2</sup> Nielsen Total Audience Report, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2016/the-total-audience-report-q1-2016.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> National Human Activity Pattern Survey, (NHAPS) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11477521>.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Geological Survey's Water Science School, "What is a watershed?" <https://water.usgs.gov/edu/watershed.html>.
- <sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 1963.
- <sup>6</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, London: Yale University Press, 2011).
- <sup>7</sup> Most recently in 2005 in the decision *City Of Sherrill V. Oneida Indian Nation Of N.Y.*, the US Supreme Court held that repurchase of traditional tribal lands did not restore tribal sovereignty to those lands.
- <sup>8</sup> Doctrine of Discovery website. [www.doctrineofdiscovery.org](http://www.doctrineofdiscovery.org)
- <sup>9</sup> Learn names of Indigenous communities from your area <https://native-land.ca>
- <sup>10</sup> Tribal Directory Assessment Tool of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. <https://egis.hud.gov/tdat/>
- <sup>11</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/state-tribal-institute/list-of-federal-and-state-recognized-tribes.aspx#State>



Rev. Cyndy Ash, Jubilee Farms in Clinton, IL, provided by Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.

- <sup>12</sup> Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, New York, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017.
- <sup>13</sup> Steve Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010.
- <sup>14</sup> Ched Meyers, *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016, 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Munther Isaac, *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth*, (Carlise, Cumbria: Langham Monographs, 2015), 368.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 370.
- <sup>17</sup> Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).
- <sup>18</sup> Navajo theologian and activist Mark Charles uses the term *conciliation* rather than *reconciliation*, since there was not a previous state of unity between European-American Christians and Native American communities. <http://wirelesshogan.blogspot.com/2014/12/doctrine-of-discovery.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> Story reprinted with permission from "Climate change, migration and the ELCA" from Living Lutheran, April 12, 2017
- <sup>20</sup> Department of Interior Website, retrieved on Feb. 5, 2018, <https://www.doi.gov/blog/my-world-interrupted>.
- <sup>21</sup> United Nations website, retrieved on Feb. 5, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/climate-change-and-disasters>
- <sup>22</sup> Excerpted from "Caring for Shishmaref and all of God's creation," by Nathan Detweiler, *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, October 6, 2016.



New Roots planting at the People's Garden (Louisville, KY). Photo credit: Andrew Kang Barlett. Provided by Presbyterian Hunger Program.



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](http://www.creationjustice.org)



Photo by Green Chalice, Pilgrimage.

*“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.)<sup>23</sup> 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.)<sup>24</sup> 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 open ourselves to the Holy Spirit!

**All:** We have come to experience the God of Creation in 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.

<sup>23</sup>Learn the names of the Indigenous tribes from your area, <https://native-land.ca>.

<sup>24</sup>Additional resources on writing a land acknowledgement statement, “Know the Land Territories Campaign,” <http://www.lspirg.org/knowtheland>.

*“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.”*<sup>25</sup> Chief Lawrence Hart (Southern Cheyenne)

## TAKE ACTION



Photo by Green Chalice, 100 days hike.

### 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](http://www.findyourpark.com)

Advocate for Public Lands

[www.creationjustice.org/protecting-places](http://www.creationjustice.org/protecting-places)

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

### 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](http://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](http://www.epa.gov/surf)

Find water prayer and action resources

[www.creationjustice.org/water](http://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](http://www.creationjustice.org/endangered)

[www.creationjustice.org/creatures](http://www.creationjustice.org/creatures)



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