

Common Ground (Psalm 84)
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church
October 28, 2007

Thousands of years ago the psalmist wrote, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O God.” Less than twenty years ago, the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote, “The whole universe is God’s dwelling [place].”¹ The psalmist was writing a song that could be sung on the way to the temple in Jerusalem. The bishops were writing an affirmation that the divine could be found both within and without the church walls. “How lovely is your dwelling place.” “The whole universe is [your] dwelling [place].” For some, there is a great distance between these two ideas. For others, they have always gone together. But for our purposes this morning there is a road that unites them. And it isn’t only that old metaphorical road that we speak of so often, the path traveled on our journeys of faith. It is a real road. A dirt road. A road that might pass by any number of country churches and agricultural fields. A road on the outskirts of Mobile, Alabama in the year 1949.

Had we been on that dirt road almost sixty years ago, we might have met one Edward Wilson. At the time, Ed was a senior at the University of Alabama, deeply immersed in the study of entomology with “a special interest in the biology of ants.” He had been hired by the Alabama Department of Conservation to “conduct a survey of the red imported fire ant and its impact on the environment.”² The fire ants were recent arrivals to the state, and traipsing about chronicling them was the perfect job for Ed. He spent his days looking for the mounds they built, dropping to a knee to observe, and learning to

¹ Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet’s Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 93.

² E. O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), 46-47.

contend with the small, stinging bites that were followed by several hours of uncomfortable itching. It was the life! Little did Ed know, as he traveled the back roads, how far his search would take him or how circular it would ultimately become.

Ed himself was a Southerner, and, as such, he was steeped in evangelical Protestantism. To be more precise, he was raised a Southern Baptist. In his own words, “As a boy I...answered the altar call; I went under the water.”³ But as he grew into adulthood and pursued a scientific course, Ed found that the old faith that divided heaven from earth, body from spirit, and the supernatural from the natural wasn’t for him. Rather, he began to find his own sense of wonder in the intricacies of biological life here on earth. That sense of wonder extended both upward into the solar system and the larger universe, but it also extended downward into the microenvironment, the world below the grass where the insects lived, the world of life inside their bodies, into the cells and smaller still. The universe, then, to borrow physicist Freeman Dyson’s term, was “infinite in all directions.”⁴ It went farther up and deeper down than anyone could imagine. And Ed was enraptured.

As a Southern Baptist, Ed was undoubtedly familiar with the Bible. He probably knew today’s psalm. He might have been taught it in Sunday School or sung it in one of the heartfelt church services of his youth. Perhaps he heard a sermon about it, given by one of the South’s great biblical expositors. If so, he would have known that Psalm 84 was written in reference to the Hebrew temple, the holiest of holy places in Jerusalem. It was something of a pilgrim song meant to hearten travelers of the well-worn way to that sacred city. Ed’s own pilgrimage, however, was leading him to a seemingly different

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Freeman J. Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

place. The road that he started on as a Southern Baptist turned toward a life dedicated to science and, with it, a new commitment to a decidedly secular humanism. Far from a journey toward the temple, Ed's path seemed to be leading him away from it, at least away from his evangelical Southern heritage. As it turned out, he took a post at Harvard and became a preeminent biologist and science writer. He traveled the world researching ants, following paths through this jungle and along that plain, so far afield, in fact, that one could almost forget that dirt road outside of Mobile. Well, almost...

“How lovely is your dwelling place.” “The whole universe is [your] dwelling [place].”

The psalmist was no entomologist, but he was filled with wonder just the same. And if Ed Wilson was following the longing to learn all that he could about “living Nature,” then the psalmist was following a kind of longing as well. According to Hebrew scholar Jon Levenson, “Most of the body of Psalm 84...[is] expressive of a profound yearning for life in the Temple. The poet longs for...communion with God in...[God's] own abode.”⁵ This divine dwelling place is understood to be the temple, which is, in some way, the human ritual re-creation of the world for which we long. The temple was a place of fair dealing, honest speech, covenant relationship, and profound reverence. In short, it was a place meant to provide a frame of orientation for the people through its enactment of values. It was a place that reminded people of the world they wanted and could still work for in the ways they chose to relate. In Levenson's words, it provided “entrance to the ideal” through “higher way[s] of acting...in ordinary life.”⁶ The temple

⁵ Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 177.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

united heaven and earth, reconciling them somehow through ethical living. This is the stuff of the psalmist's dream and it is the breath of his song. He yearns for the temple where seemingly different worlds can be brought into a kind of harmony.

At least a part of the psalmist's ancient human hope is easily translatable to the current context. For we, too, gather in our small church on a weekly basis to ritually re-create the world we want. It is here that we seek to order our lives based on a certain ethic, oftentimes an ethic that differs markedly from the prevailing cultural ethos. So in this church, in our temple, as it were, we have tried to bring into harmony women and men, old and young, gay and straight, poor and rich, and white and black. It is our way of saying that the differences between us are superficial when compared with the deeper humanity that we all share. But added to this is the fact that we have also tried, more and more over the years, to bring ourselves back into right relationship with the natural world. We had this in mind when we constructed our sacred space and people asked that we add a few more windows. We needed natural light to fall on the pews and green branches to sway behind the lectern with only a thin pane of glass separating our two sacred spaces: the temple and the world. I dare say many of us look forward to coming to church because this sense of connection inspires us. And we could sing our own psalm if we wanted, a song of pilgrimage from the neighborhoods and suburbs of our city to this place where we can gather together, united as we praise and work as equals. On our best days we may actually flesh out something of Levenson's ideal in ordinary life. The challenge, of course, is that not every day is one of our best days.

Ironically, it is our very commitment to our little egalitarian church that sometimes separates us from the whole. A hidden temptation develops over time to think that we

really have got it just right and that, by inference, most others don't. I'm not sure that we even do this at a conscious level and perhaps because of that we need to be especially mindful. For who among us hasn't found themselves looking down our liberal noses, however subtly, at some other church, some other community, some other group with very different views from our own. (Take, for example, Ed Wilson's old Southern Baptists.) Perhaps the road from a rightful pride in our principles to an uncritical self-righteousness is shorter than we think. It's a question worth asking. Because while our community is meant to ritually re-create the world that we want, it is not meant to insulate us from the world we have. For the world we have needs us now more than ever. And it needs us to join with others of good faith, even if their faith is quite different from our own. Which begs the question of how truly inclusive we are able to be.

“How lovely is your dwelling place.” “The whole universe is [your] dwelling [place].”

Ed Wilson is now an older man, but when he speaks he still sounds like that college kid from Alabama, eyes glinting and lips curving into a smile as he describes the marvels of the microenvironment. In fact, if there ever was a psalmist of entomology, then it must be Ed Wilson. His writings read like canticles of yearning for the temple of the world, the holy place of his own life and work among the ants and their many cousins. But his books are also enlivened by a growing sense of urgency. Among the things he has most carefully documented in his travels is the rapidly accelerating extinction of animal and plant species everywhere. This extinction is due to five basic factors: habitat loss, invasive species, pollution, human overpopulation, and overharvesting.⁷ And as

⁷ Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, 75.

Wilson reminds us that we are only just beginning to get a glimpse of the ineffable biodiversity of the web of life, barely grasping so many of its delicate relationships, we are also losing more than we can really imagine as one species after another vanishes from the earth. He writes poetically of the intrinsic value of every species, regardless of its utility to humankind, but he also notes the stark truth that if we destroy enough of nature, then we, as a part of nature, will perish along with it. Ed Wilson's concern, then, is universal. As such, it has led him down a rather surprising road, the sort of road he might have traveled as a much younger man.

In his most recent book, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, Ed Wilson, the renowned biologist and confirmed humanist, sat down and wrote a 168-page letter to an imagined Southern Baptist minister. The person to whom he is writing is essentially the sort of minister with whom he grew up and to whom so many Southerners still listen every Sunday. And in a warm Alabama tone, Ed Wilson writes to his evangelical counterpart and asks if our two most potent forces, religion and science, can't find a way to join their efforts to preserve the earth we share. He begins by clearly naming a number of differences, saying to his pastor that they have nearly opposite ways of envisioning the world. The traditional minister is dealing in the supernatural and the spiritual; the scientist is working with the natural and bodily. Wilson writes, "For you [pastor], [there is] the glory of an unseen divinity; for me, the glory of the universe revealed at last. For you, the belief in God made flesh to save [humankind]; for me, the belief in Promethean fire seized to make [humans] free." "[But]," he asks, "does this difference in worldview

separate us in all things?”⁸ It’s a beautifully direct question and as Ed Wilson asks it, he seems to be getting a bit close to home.

Listening to Wilson we can hear that his own search has brought him full circle, speaking at long last to his Southern Baptist childhood. Somehow in his search to reconcile us with nature and work for its protection, he seems to invite us to consider reconciling with our sisters and brothers in the evangelical church as well. And by sisters and brothers, I mean sisters and brothers because so many of us have family members, friends, and coworkers who espouse a faith very different from our own. It won’t be long now until we’re sitting around the Thanksgiving table with them or perhaps sipping wassail at an office gathering, fooling ourselves into thinking that we have nothing in common and should stick to small talk. But the truth is that there is a lot of space for dialogue between the absolutes of complete agreement and complete disagreement. Wilson himself finds the space by simply avoiding any attempt to iron out all of the differences. He is no longer a Southern Baptist and does not mean to become one. Rather, he remains committed to a worldview informed by the body of scientific knowledge and committed to the scientific method. But neither does he mean to exclude any other person from the shared work of preserving life on earth. “What are we to do [then]?” Ed Wilson asks. “Forget the differences, I say. Meet on common ground.”⁹ With that he issues a challenge to each of us.

If we were to follow Wilson’s lead, then we might begin the kind of conversations that he means for us to start. These are, quite frankly, conversations that may not even share the same language. For example, the scientist will say “living Nature” and the

⁸ Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

evangelical “the Creation.” But rather than getting hung up on those terms, Wilson would have us explore the love of each for the beauty of the earth. And he would waste no time trying to hash out some metaphysical agreement because, in his view, we simply haven’t got the time to waste. I’m not sure that these kinds of conversations are something that the liberal church is particularly good at because we love our words and their seeming uniqueness so much. More often than not, we choose to focus on our own little temple singing our particularly progressive songs. But the ritual world that we work so hard to re-create in this sacred space every Sunday is really just one strand in the larger web of our big Southern city filled with evangelical churches whose members we meet in our everyday comings and goings. Perhaps in the past we have felt only the threat of those “others” and been keen to point out our honest differences. Like Ed Wilson, we have named plainly enough that, though we were once Southern Baptists, we are not any more. We made that break in conscience and need not look back. But if we really affirm the theological, ethical, and biological truth that all things are interconnected, then we may have a bit more work to do. Our work may be to go one step beyond the naming of our differences, to continue along Wilson’s road until it becomes circular again and we can find more than differences to define us. Our work may be to give the scientist’s method a try and go looking for others with whom we might partner, others of any and all persuasions, committed to working for the good of the natural world that we share. Our work may be to set out along that way, the strange, mystical, not so well-worn way, past all the polemics and the false divisions to see if we can’t begin to heal a few of the old wounds.

It is a curious thing to consider that caring for the natural world might be related to caring for each other. It is a strange affirmation to say that the work of healing is both an inner and an outer process. It is an unusual song to sing that we are all of us, from Southern Baptists to secular humanists, connected farther up and deeper down than anyone can imagine. But if we learn to sing such a song, then we might find ourselves as the old psalmist or the biologist, traveling the road between where we've come from and where we're going. And if we are really going anywhere, as people, as a species, as caretakers of this earth, we can only get there by working together.

“How lovely is your dwelling place.” “The whole [universe] is your dwelling [place].” Indeed.

May we act in such a way that we preserve it.