

MONASTICISM & PLACE MAKING

by Lena Van Wyk

I have a confession to make. I have a reality TV addiction. Not all reality TV, but one particular series of shows produced by the BBC that reenacts historical farming communities: Edwardian Farm, Victorian Farm, and (my favorite) Tudor Monastery Farm. These shows got me through the first month of my baby's life. Sleep deprived with an inconsolable baby, I spent hours rocking and feeding her while losing myself in the details of how to build a coppiced, woven fence for keeping sheep in 16th century style.

Tudor Monastery Farm is amazing fodder for an Anglican community trying to recreate ancient ways of being a land-centered parish that farms together and builds community rooted in place. The show demonstrates how British monasteries, before the Reformation, established sustainable agrarian communities by regulating how common space was used and shared. The church owned all the land and its parishioners farmed it, but not in a privatized way like we now think of farming. The community farmed together and church leaders stewarded wild spaces (woodlands, streams, fisheries, pastures) together so that no individual took more from the land than it could sustain over generations. The monasteries were not perfect or without corruption, but on the whole, historians agree that they preserved a stable way of rural life for many centuries.

This deep tie to place in British Christianity began in the first centuries of the church on the British Isles, in the 5th and 6th centuries, where evangelist monks often lived very close to the land in hermitages and monasteries in wild places, like the Isle of Iona off of the coast of Scotland in the case of St. Columba, or on rocky coastal cliffs in England in the case of St. Morwenna. Many of these saints were said to have miraculous interactions with animals and the rest of creation. One of the best books I read this summer, *Seven Holy Women: Conversations with Saints and Friends*, recounts how St. Morwenna was one of the first evangelists to Cornwall. As a way of establishing a church there, she lived on a seaside cliff in a hut. Every morning, she would travel down a treacherous path to the sea where she gathered rocks, which she put on her head and carried back up to the top of the cliff, where she built a church stone by stone--by herself! Now that's a dedicated woman of God. One day, when she stopped to rest halfway up the path, a new spring gushed forth: a miraculous sign of God's living water refreshing her and anointing the place!

As Michael Northcott chronicles in his book *Place Ecology and the Sacred: The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities*, Celtic Christianity was deeply tied to the creation of sacred space from the very beginning: "For the Celts, as for the desert fathers, this work was not primarily for mortification of the flesh but a post-Edenic recreation of a paradisaical state in the wild lands where they created self-sufficient dwellings. [...] As Harold Massingham puts it, the Celtic churches of Britain took up a 'sanctification of the entire world of nature,' which provided as true an echo of the rural Christ of the gospels as could be found anywhere in Christendom."²

For almost ten centuries, the lands of the British Isles were shaped and formed by church-based communities. Monks and lay people worked together to develop farming techniques, care for local coppiced woodlands (a method of harvesting wood without killing the tree), and tending to pastures, waterways and fisheries. The church calendar and the agricultural calendar were deeply intertwined, with feast days connecting the biblical story and saint days to the rhythms of the agricultural year.

Though the birth of Anglicanism and other reformational expressions of the Church during the 16th century brought needed new life to the church, the political ramifications for the British Isles were not a wholly blessed thing. King Henry VIII resented the power that monasteries held, as they owned a third of the land in his kingdom, so he had them destroyed. Though there was corruption that indeed needed correcting, the utter destruction of this ancient system of religious and community life was unwise. As Northcott argues, "The Dissolution of the Monasteries, begun in England by Henry VIII and his chancellor Lord Wolsey between 1536 and 1541, was the seminal event in the breaks between nature and religion, food growing and urban living, town and countryside, that are implicated in the modern ecological crisis."

Essentially, after the crown took much of England's and Scotland's arable land away from the monasteries, it transferred it into the hands of aristocratic families, who converted it from small-scale farms that supported many families to vast estates for sheep grazing to make profitable wool. Thousands of rural people had to move off the land and into cities. This effect continued for centuries, referred to as "The Enclosures," and precipitated great migration into urban areas (fueling the industrial revolution) and to the Americas. This shift in agriculture also caused great ecological degradation due to deforestation and overgrazing, converting much of the United Kingdom into what ecologists call a "wet desert" devoid of much biodiversity.

As modern-day Anglicans at Church of the Redeemer, we have a chance to glean wisdom from the ancient roots of the Celtic Christianity that so shaped Anglicanism. We have an opportunity to form our own expression of church-based place making. As we become a pro-cathedral of our diocese, we have an opportunity to learn from our ancestors and practice the art of creating sacred space in a way that fosters ecological life and agricultural abundance.



It would have been easy on that busy, normal day at Temple to miss them: a young family with their only child. A common sight: I'm sure they weren't the only ones. In the past 40 days, Mary had given birth to her first child. She and Joseph had packed up their belongings and traveled the dusty road to Jerusalem. Somewhere, they had found new lodgings, and hopefully a friend or two, while navigating the busy tax season in the big city. They must have traveled soon after the birth because they had come to the temple exactly 8 days after their son's birth. They were coming to fulfill the law and also to worship, presenting their child for circumcision and bestowing on him the name that had been commanded by the angel: Jesus. Understandably, at this time, they had arrived at the temple without much. Newborn life is hard. Traveling with a child is exhausting. And can you even imagine how they could have spoken together of the visit from the shepherds just a few weeks earlier?

The temple was a stunning place to worship. For over 1,000 years it had stood as a visible sign of God's faithfulness to His people. It was law and custom for a woman who had given birth to present herself there. Chapter 12 of Leviticus tells us what is required at this time: "And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtle-doves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering" (see Exodus 13 and Numbers 18). While this ceremony was mostly for the re-integration of the mother into the community, it was also a time of worship. It was a reminder that the children of the faithful belong to God. In a special way, the Jewish people dedicated their first-born. Mary and Joseph, likely anxious and weary, took what they had to offer to the place God had commanded them to gather. They could not afford a lamb. They wrapped up their son and carried him to the temple with their two-bird offering.

Mary proceeded through the purification rites and then, something surprising happened. What was a common event was made luminous with revelation. In the presence of the Christ child, a light began to shine in Simeon, the priest's eyes -- a light he had never seen. Sometime before, God had promised that he would see It and when he does--this very special day--he chants or sings out: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32).

A brief song of true peace! Luke 2 verse 27 tells us that it was the Holy Spirit that brought Simeon there at that moment. And by keeping in step with the Spirit of God, Simeon sees His light in the face of this child. So much of what happened in the temple--the prophecies, sacrifices, rituals, promises, even the architecture, all the works of God--pointed to the day that the Messiah would come. Simeon sees the fulfillment of it!

EYES TO SEE

by Leah Wall

disappointing in some ways, when we read the story of this significant revelation! It seems as though barely anything happened at that moment. Yes -- Simeon sees and rejoices! A prophetess, Anna, who is usually praying and fasting, comes up to them at this time as well. She is also enlightened by a mere glimpse of this child and the light of God turns to strength in her. It overflows into a proclamation of the truth of God in thanksgiving. Blessing! Peace! Light! Revelation! Redemption! Anna sees and gives thanks! Simeon has also seen, but where is the crowd? Why are there not many others seeing the light and being moved to rejoice in it?



In the face of these parents and their young child, Simeon and Anna had eyes to see the promise and hope of the ages. They saw the hope of the world. And, yet, in that Holy place of worship, even where all things pointed to the coming Messiah, only a few had eyes to see. My own experiences in parenthood remind me of this. With faithful looking, we can see the supernatural in the faces of those whom God has made, and with prayerful awareness, glimpse the fulfillment of God's promises in the lives of children as Simeon and Anna did in the Christ child: A thing of innocence and vulnerability, yet bursting with God's light.

How was the presence of God-in-flesh known only to two of the faithful people in the temple that day? It seems so obvious to us as we read the passage in our time, but if present in that moment, would we have counted ourselves among those who

had eyes to see the Christ child? Isaiah 11:6 says that a little child will lead us. This is a poignant reminder not only for Christmas-time. Jesus' own treatment of and words about children echo this same prophetic word. They will show you the way to the kingdom of God, he teaches in Luke 18, along with a sober warning about dismissing the child's perspective. What are we missing when we close our eyes or turn our faces from the small, the poor, the unexpected, the young? The wise leadership and incalculable value of such would be easy to miss.

How, like Simeon, can I be at truest peace, following the lead of the Spirit of God more closely? How, like Anna, can my hope and openness to the presence of God grow through the years? How, like Mary and Joseph, can I continue in faithfulness even when I am exhausted and have little to offer? Where do my own expectations of where to find God's presence or promises actually keep me from seeing the face of God? What can I do to prepare my mind and my sight so that I do not miss the light of God when it is shining right before me?

¹ Laura S. Jansson, et al. *Seven Holy Women: Conversations with Saints and Friends* (Munster, IN: Ancient Faith, 2020).

² Michael S. Northcott. *Place, Ecology and the Sacred: The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015) 30-31.