CHAPTER 1

EARTH AS THE ORIGINAL CATHEDRAL

It could be said that God's foot is so vast
that this entire earth is but a
field on God's
toe,

and all the forests in this world
came from the same root of just
a single hair
of God's.

What then is not a sanctuary?
Where then can I not kneel
and pray at a shrine
made holy by God's
presence?

—St. Catherine of Siena, "The Sanctuary"[1]

Sometimes when I work with retreat groups, I start by having them engage in a simple storytelling exercise called babbling,[2] in which retreatants pair up and each person speaks for a minute on a word I provide. It is a spontaneous activity, and the idea is to just notice what comes up in the moment. I might offer words like *lemon*, *mountain*, *wolf*, or *purple*, and people tell stories that arise in the moment. Then the last thing I ask participants to reflect on is a place that is a sanctuary for them. There is

often a shift of energy in the room as people describe their own sanctuary places, and the majority of people describe a place in nature.

Biologist Colin Tudge writes in his book about trees, "Groves of redwoods and beeches are often compared to the naves of great cathedrals: the silence; the green, filtered, numinous light. A single banyan, each with its multitude of trunks, is like a temple or mosque—a living colonnade. But the metaphor should be the other way around. The cathedrals and mosques emulate the trees. The trees are innately holy."[3] Next time you are in the forest, imagine this space as one of the primordial or original churches—a sanctuary that has helped inspire the creation of thousands of other sanctuary spaces. Notice what arises in your body when you imagine being in the cathedral of trees, joining them in praise of the Holy. Pause and slow down, aligning yourself with God's presence there. The cathedrals we build reflect the sacred spaces that trees have already been creating for thousands of years.

Some of the stories of St. Patrick tell us that he first learned to pray outside during his early years as a slave in Ireland and how his presence in the woods and the mountains summoned forth a continual stream of prayers in response to that sacred space. The Celtic tradition holds closely the idea of thin places, where heaven and earth touch. The landscape in Ireland where I live is dotted with hundreds of sacred spaces including holy wells, sacred mountains, and stone ruins.

St. Francis of Assisi is probably the saint that most often comes to mind when we consider how to connect to the beauty and solace of nature. His church was in the more-than-human world of nature that he loved so dearly: "Sometimes he preached by the candle-light of stars. Often the cloistering trees along the roadside made his chapel, and the blue sky was the only roof between him and heaven. Often his choir was of the brother birds in the branches and his congregation a group of brother beasts."[4]

Field and forests, mountains and shorelines became the site for St. Francis's worship and discovery of the intimacy of God. He is known for preaching to the birds and for the prayers he wrote that celebrate the gift of the natural elements.

Joachim of Fiore was a twelfth-century Cistercian mystic in Italy who likely influenced St. Francis. He is also known for worshipping outside.

It is said that sometimes when he was leading a service and the clouds cleared away, "he saluted the sun, sang the *Veni Creator*, and led the congregation forth to view the shining landscape."[5]

When we take Christ's Incarnation seriously, we discover that the Holy is indeed everywhere. Church spaces are beautiful and sacred, invoking the Sacred Presence and providing important places to gather. But nature offers us the original cathedrals and churches. When we step among trees with our eyes and hearts open, we discover the radiance to be found there. Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin writes, "By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers. . . . The world, this palpable world, which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place, and we did not know it."[6] The world we live in is "in truth a holy place," and our task is to remember this and to cultivate a growing awareness of the ways in which forest and hills can inspire a sense of sanctuary in our hearts. We would not desecrate our chapels and churches; in the same way, the more we nurture this intimate connection to Earth, the more we will be inspired to protect it at all costs.

Geobiographies and Archetypal Landscapes

Archetypal landscapes are spaces that are evocative and meaningful to people across cultures and time. Their existence acknowledges that we are shaped by the landscape we live in and that some landscapes speak to our hearts more clearly and resoundingly than others.

For some of us, it may be the forest that calls to us as the great cathedral of creation. For others, mountaintops are the pinnacle, offering an experience of spiritual transcendence. Or perhaps it is the sea that calls to your heart, offering her rhythm of pouring forth or drawing back, creating a temple out of its depths and hallowed ground at the rich space where sea meets earth.

Scripture is filled with holy encounters on top of mountains, in caves, and by lakes, rivers, and seas. Irish monks were inspired by the desert call

to find solitude in wild places and journeyed out to the wilderness for an experience of radical intimacy with God.

One of the ways to connect more deeply and intimately with a felt sense of creation as the original sacred space is to remember the landscapes that have personal significance. Art therapist Peter London describes these as "geobiographies," the inner contours of the landscape of our souls:

> Each of the great forms that Earth takes—mountains and hills and plains and valleys and meadows and steppes and swamps and marshes and deserts and forests and jungles and savannas and beaches and islands—each of these geographies we transmute to geobiographies of our own personal journey across time and circumstance. We too rise up, we ascend, we fall, only to rise and fall over and over, until we are leveled and become one again with the single mantle that is the resting ground and birthing ground of it all. The meanings we ascribe to the trajectory of our lives are the same ones we observe in the fate of the Earth. The finite summit of the mountain's peak, the river's final arrival to the sea, the clearing in the depths of the woods, serve as exemplars and as metaphors for the often steep and uncertain and perilous journey that is our life.[7]

Earth has multiple terrains, as does the soul. Becoming familiar with the outer landscape reveals dimensions to us of our inner ones as well. Recognizing which territories enliven our souls and which ones challenge us brings us closer to discovering who we most deeply are and what we long for.

Mary Reynolds Thompson, in her book *Reclaiming the Wild Soul: How Earth's Landscapes Restore Us to Wholeness*, describes five archetypal landscapes she calls "soulscapes," which are the meeting point between the inner world of self and the outer world of Earth. These soulscapes are desert, forest, oceans and rivers, mountains, and grasslands.[8] Each landscape has a set of unique gifts and invitations, including the draw from simplicity to mystery, the flow of our desires, the power we

have to inspire and shape the world, and the call to settle into a place and create community.

In my own life, I have found myself in love with particular places because of the way nature is alive there. I grew up in New York City, about as far from wild nature as you can get. However, my father was Austrian, and in the summers we would travel back to Austria to visit family and spend time in the Alps in the Tyrol region of western Austria.

We would often hike the trails in the Alps; I would try to keep up with my father as he walked in his measured pace and told me about the great Austrian writers, artists, and composers. Every so often I would ask him how much farther the trail was while pausing to catch my breath and admire the Alpine cows along the way that munched slowly on the grass. Sometimes he poured a bit of beer on a picnic bench, and I would giggle as the cow's great thick tongue came and lapped it up. Once we arrived at the trail's end, there was always a hut that served *knodelsuppe*, a rich beef broth with a large bread dumpling sitting in the center, often with *speck*, a kind of bacon. Hiking those trails had a kind of certainty to it: no matter how challenging, you always stayed on the path and would eventually reach the goal.

When John, my husband, and I were finishing up graduate school in the San Francisco Bay area, we visited a friend in Seattle, Washington, and we both fell in love with the Pacific Northwest. The landscape, with its intertwining of forest, sea, lake, and mountain, kindled something in our hearts we hadn't felt before—the land was calling to both of us. Over the nine years we lived there, I especially fell in love with the places where the wild edges meet—the borderland between forest and sea—and I discovered this place within me. We each have within us many threshold places where our love of the Divine meets our love of the world, where our hearts and minds unite, where the differing parts of ourselves come together to listen to our calling in the world.

When we moved to Vienna, Austria, from Seattle because of a call to adventure, the *Wienerwald* (Vienna woods) became a source of great solace for me as I dealt with the loneliness of living in a new place far away from my familiar life, and I deepened in my appreciation of the witness of trees. Now living on the west coast of Ireland, I am learning to love the

rawness of this wild edge, the way the wind blows fiercely off the Atlantic, the haunting sound creating its own kind of church bell summoning my attention back to the current moment in time. In this place with few trees, stone has become vitally important for my sense of what it is that endures.

Think of the garden path or diving into the deep sea, of climbing majestic mountains or crossing wide open plains. Even walking through an urban neighborhood has its own kind of resonance. Each one has a particular quality that evokes something within us.

Pause for a moment and imagine each of these places, and allow a few moments simply to become aware of your body's physical response to a particular kind of landscape. Some may make your heart soar, while others make it contract; some may create no real felt response at all.

Beasts and Saints: Ross Errilly Friary

About a half-hour drive north of Galway City, in the west of Ireland, when you arrive at the village of Headford, you can turn left at the crossroads. Two kilometers down the road is the turn to visit Ross Errilly Friary, the ruin of a fourteenth-century Franciscan abbey. It is a beautiful site, one of the best-preserved medieval Christian monasteries in Ireland, with beautiful stone archways and the cloister walk fairly intact.

We bring our pilgrim groups. I have heard the beautiful stone ruins blanketing the Irish landscape sometimes called "sky-clad" churches because the roofs are mostly gone and they invite us into a unity of sky and earth at the heart of our prayer. Rather than think of these churches as ruins, we might consider the invitation rising up from these spaces to remember Earth as our original place of worship and encounter with the Divine. This is one of the things I love most about these old stone churches in Ireland: they invite us to hold the traditions of faith while also making connection with Earth, seeing the two as unified.

Theologian John Philip Newell describes the nunnery on the sacred island of Iona in Scotland as holding a similar kind of invitation to consider the sacredness of the stones while also feeling the connection with sky and earth. Because this monastery is a ruin, the roof is no more. It has a very different feel from praying in the abbey on the island, which

has been rebuilt. Newell writes, "The desire to pray in the Nunnery is the desire to pray again in relationship with the earth."[9]

There is a story that says that at the time Ross Errilly Friary was founded, the bubonic plague was spreading rampantly and monks were ministering to those in need. Archbishop MacHugh prayed for the plague to end and his energy to be renewed. It is said he fell asleep while praying and had a dream in which he was instructed to build a church. He was told to walk west until a sign was given to him. He took three friars with him, and they set out. Eventually they saw three swans holding bunches of flax seed in their bills and flying overhead. The swans circled three times, and as the swans flew away, the monks drew closer to see the earth beneath where they circled. They found flax in full bloom, even though it was only February. This is where the church was founded.

There are many stories like this in the Christian tradition, especially from the desert and Celtic monks, in which connection to animals had a special status and significance and God could be found offering signs and guidance through their presence.

The Practice of Stability

Stability is one of the three vows Benedictine monks make. It is a commitment to a particular monastery for life. St. Benedict had special disdain for monks who would wander from place to place, because he knew well that when we try to outrun our issues in community, the issues will always follow us.

Benedict writes in his Rule that from the day of a monk's monastic vows, "he is no longer free to leave the monastery, nor to shake from his neck the yoke of the rule which, in the course of so prolonged a period of reflection, he was free to either reject or accept."[10] St. Benedict required his monks to commit to a monastery for their whole lives so that they would not run away when things got challenging.

Stability calls us to a commitment to work through the difficult things of our lives. We can run away both physically and emotionally in our desires for distraction, entertainment, and ease. When we are in a long-term relationship with another person or with a community, there will be times

of challenge and times of boredom. The monastic way is to stay with this commitment and see what we are taught in the act of staying through the discomfort. This is the work of a lifetime.

There is another aspect to the practice of stability, and that is commitment to a place. When we vow to stay and work through the challenges we feel, we are deepening our relationship not only with those we share a life with but also with the landscape that shapes us and the creatures and plants that inhabit our region. Stability also calls us to grow in our love of the particularity of the place where we live, the particular cathedral we inhabit. We are invited to learn the names of the birds that visit or the herbs that grow up in the cracks and fields.

When we move often from place to place, it is challenging to deepen into our commitment to the land we are living on. Recognizing Earth as our original sanctuary means deepening our love for the ground that nourishes us at home as well as away. It means finding the spots nearby where we can sit and ponder and be with nature in all her splendor, even if that is a bench in a city park. Deepen your commitment to learning about the place you live—the local birds, plants, animals. Finding out their names roots us more strongly in place.

Scripture Reflection from John Valters Paintner

The First Creation Myth (Genesis 1:1–2:4)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be. . . ."

–Genesis 1:1–3

There are two separate creation myths in the book of Genesis, and they contradict each other significantly on the timing and order of events. Most scholars agree that the second myth actually predates the first. The two common responses to this conundrum in the opening chapters of the Bible are either to dig in one's dogmatic heels and insist that it's all factually literal or to throw it all out as a bunch of made-up ancient folklore that is neither scientific nor historical and therefore irrelevant to modernity.

Fortunately, there is a third approach. What the two previous approaches get wrong is in understanding what is meant by "inspiration." When we say the Bible is "inspired by God," that isn't to say that God dictated stories to people but rather that people were compelled to write stories about their encounters and understanding and—perhaps most importantly—even questions about God. Myths aren't "made-up stories"; they are tales that point to greater truths.

What sets the creation myths of the Judeo-Christian sacred texts apart from others of the ancient Middle East is not the belief in monotheism (although that is revealed slowly over time to the Israelites). No, what is unique about that new religion was the belief in a different type of deity, a belief in a good and benevolent God. Other ancient cultures believed that the world was a cruel and chaotic place. They believed that, at best, the gods ignored them. They believed the world was full of suffering and death because that is how they viewed their gods. These ancient religions prayed and sacrificed in hopes of appeasing the petty and greedy natures of their gods.

The ancient Israelites, however, looked at the same world and saw a good and bountiful world. The first creation myth in Genesis is a theological statement of their belief that God created order and beauty and abundance out of the chaos. Our spiritual ancestors prayed and sacrificed to thank God for what they had already been blessed with. The second creation myth explains why there is suffering and death in this good and perfect world. Hint: it's not God's fault. Combined, the two myths work as a type of prelude to the "main event" of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Babylonian Exile. They foreshadow the establishment and then destruction of the Israelite kingdom.

In the first creation myth, God does not create something out of nothing. There is something before the creation. There is a formless void, a swirling storm of wind and water unfit for human life—an analogy of the fickle Babylonian storm god Ba'al (a recurring foe to Yahweh and the Israelites throughout the Hebrew Scriptures). What God does is to slowly, methodically, and very intentionally create order out of the chaos. The Israelites' God speaks, and the Babylonians' god obeys. The analogy is carried over into the Christian scriptures when Jesus orders the stormy sea to be calm.

Over the course of the six days of the first creation myth, God builds a protective bubble that keeps the waters above and below at bay. God dries the land within and plants vegetation there. God then sets up the days and seasons to regulate and organize the world. Next, God creates animal life to fill the world. Finally, as a culmination of all the preparation, God creates humans (man and woman together on the same day) in the divine image.

And it was very good.

Although it avoids the "dominion" language of the second creation myth, the first is understandably human-centric: all the world and all the plants and animals therein are created for the purpose of sustaining human life. This perspective is off-kilter, but after all, the scriptures were written by human authors for a human audience, neither of which were much concerned with objectivity at the time. God created the world for God's own delight, blessing all aspects of the world as good apart from their usefulness for humans. But there is another lesson in the first creation myth to be learned as well. All of creation is the intentional handiwork of the Creator. Not just humans but all of creation mirrors the beauty of the Creator. Nature is experienced as a vast and sacred landscape shimmering with goodness because of its divine creation. Nature is the original sacred space and sanctuary where humans are invited to dwell.

While some read Genesis and interpret it to mean that we humans are better than creation, the proper interpretation is that we humans are part of creation. We are connected to all life through our common Creator. We may have more responsibility, but we do not have greater status.