

EARTH DAY SERMON      BEULAH LAND      THE REV. BRIAN BACKSTRAND

One of the blessings and banes of my life in recent weeks and months especially is the presence of memories from the past that come calling. These are fragile filaments of memory, not especially imposing memories that are easy to recall, but slender and more evanescent memories that sometimes come calling and then completely disappear.

One of my memories concerns Beulah. Beulah was a draft horse on my relatives farm in Northern Washington. She was a big strong horse that my cousin and his father could not tame. They thought they could. They had many methods that had worked in the past including the running W. But Beulah was strong and willful. She resisted their charms and resisted their forceful attempts alike. One memory I have is of my uncle in his Oshkosh by Gosh overalls sort of surfing -- surfing on dried cow chips across the barnyard behind Beulah who was cruising at will during the entire time he said Woah.

I mention this memory not because of the horse but because of the name. Beulah. The people who named this horse must have been Bible people, Old Testament people whose reading included what we now call Third Isaiah. Today as I lay before us the name of Beulah, I present it as a name of resonance and a name of particular meaning for Earth Day Sunday-- April 22nd 2018.

The 62<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of the Book of Isaiah, part of the writing of Third Isaiah begins: *For Zion's sake I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest....*

Later the prophet proclaims the following word of the Lord: *You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall not more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called "My delight is in her" and your land "Married."*

Much destruction has taken place, much sense of loss and abandonment – so much so that the very land of Zion has been described as “Desolate.” Now the prophet proclaims that Jerusalem will be a place of delight and that the land, Zion itself and the earth by extension, will be termed “Married.” Married to the Spirit and the Presence of the Most

High. Courted, claimed, married by God. The Hebrew word for married is *Beulah*.  
And so the title of this sermon, Beulah land.

Much of the significance of the term “Beulah” for Christians can be traced back to the influential writing of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim Progress*. At the end of the pilgrim’s long journey towards the heavenly realm, the land of Beulah represents a kind of anteroom in which “the pilgrims rest till they are invited into the Celestial City” (Issac Asimov, *Asimov’s Guide to the Bible*, 554).

But this is a rarified concept of Beulah. However, more like the horse of my uncle’s experience—particular, imposing, powerful—Beulah is a term more for the earth than for the skies. Beulah tells us that God, YHWH, has chosen to marry the earth, not abandon her, but claim and tend the earth. Beulah is a promise that God will not forsake the creation.

*Your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called, “My Delight is in her” and your land “Married.”* Beulah Land.

If the earth is Beulah Land, married to God and claimed by the Creative and Ongoing Mystery of the Creator, what should our relationship to the land be as followers of this same Lord?

This morning I would once again submit that more and more our relationship to the earth is more desolate and destructive than beloved and claimed in love. What shall we choose in following our God? Shall we choose actions that lead to desolation or actions that claim the land as Beulah Land? Shall we disregard the needs of the earth, even the needs of our own local environment, or shall we follow our God in terms of loving and tending to the earth?

In his famous encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis of Assisi wrote:  
*I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of the*

*planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone.... Later he asserted: ...science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful to both.*

All of this is necessary because century after century, and especially in the modern era, we humans have tended, more often than not, to forsake the creation instead of marrying and affirming it. Pope Francis wrote: *The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and all forms of life.*

This weekend we have been considering the issue of water. Pope Francis wrote that *access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right.* But too often water has become a privatized commodity sold to the highest bidder or water itself has become forsaken, disregarded, polluted. 40% of America's rivers and 46% of America's lakes are too polluted for swimming, fishing or even to support aquatic life. 1.2 trillion gallons of raw, untreated sewerage, storm water and industrial waste are dumped annually into America's rivers according to the EPA. We are forsaking the waters of America and making them desolate despite the reality that Water is Life.

Yesterday, 31 people gathered in a room at Aspen Ridge Nursery in Mineral Point to think about water from another perspective. Water not as desolate. Water not as forsaken or abandoned. But water as claimed, as being part of Beulah land. Water as part of the marriage of all creation.

Kim Wahl, Director of Education for the Wisconsin Green Schools network gave a wonderful and informative talk about water, watersheds, and water quality. She led a workshop about rain barrels and pointed out that rain barrels help with storm water management, reduce erosion and increase water quality.

As the barrels were passed out and people drove away, I could not help but reflect on the positive spiritual value of caring for the earth that these plastic vessels represented.

In some small way, yesterday we were attempting not to just complain about something, not just to talk, talk, talk. Rather we were being empowered in some small way-- invited by 50 gallon barrels capable of holding 400 lbs of water-- invited by the presence of a simple rain barrel to DO something.

Beulah Land. Do we understand how God is married to the land and our own responsibility to it? Among other reasons, marriage is an institution created for intimacy and for mutual support. It embodies a covenant relationship. God marries the creation in an enduring relationship that seeks to claim it, care for it, love it.

And so you and I are called to see the created order, the biosphere as holy. We too are called to care for it, to redeem and reclaim it, to resist its destruction.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday as well as Earth Day. The Good Shepherd seeks and saves. The Good Shepherd is faithful and does not abandon the sheep. The Good Shepherd restores.

Here is a model for our own relationship to the earth. Forsaken desolate or married? We have a choice to make. Are we going to have clean air? Pure water once again? Fields of biologically living and active soil? All wild things are blessed. In his wonderful Encyclical on the Environment, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis of Assisi wrote *Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.*

Let us then choose the earth, affirm the earth as our very nurturing mother. Let us choose to be people of promise and of hope, people who would nurture and affirm and marry the earth -- affirming its reality and substance and beauty and essential goodness. God has chosen the earth and claimed it as God's own. We can do no less.