

# Her Voice

## Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

December 4, 2022

“What is the nature of your homeland? Tell me what she taught you when you were very young. Did you learn of resiliency from the dandelion making her way through the seemingly impenetrable city sidewalk? Did you find yourself surrounded by the majesty of mountains or the embrace of the sea? Did the river or stream inspire or comfort you, or were you left longing, sitting inside of a house, looking out at the great mystery all around you?

I am of the land of the cornstalks, taller than a child, even in junior high school. A woman in training, finding herself comforted by the soft bed of pine needles, sheltered in the dark forest areas behind a house filled with anger. I am of the land that fed milking cows, with calves nestling up to their teats, a land of good and plenty.

Tell me of your homeland and what it taught you.

And then share with me, if you will, when you first learned of the danger she faced, this Earth of ours.

When did you realize her fate was perilous and not a guaranteed fact of existence? When did you stop exhaling and hold your breath, overwhelmed at the immensity of the damage humans have caused and the problems facing our planet and her creatures?

*Were you taught that the earth sings?* That woodpeckers and sparrows have journeys of flight involving their hearts as well as their wings? Can you tell the difference between a wild animal’s cry for safety and one appealing to a prospective mate? Did you know trees communicate more than meets the eye and flowers are filled with life spirit and medicine? Or were you taught, as I was, that humans are the quintessential aim of all existence and that the rest of creation is less than, if alive at all?

No, I was not taught the language of animacy by everyone, though some people absolutely inspired this knowing and reverence in me. My father, who carried me backpacking through forests up and down the eastern seaboard, who bought me a subscription to *Ranger Rick* magazine for Christmas, and who never laughed at my dreams of saving the planet or helping animals. My father

taught me the language of animacy. For that, I am ever grateful.

The language of animacy, in which all of creation has agency and life force, is ubiquitous among indigenous people and their beliefs. Some white people mock this, and many romanticize it. It is time to realize its truth and to honor it. It is time to recognize and live in relationship with the Earth and our fellow creatures. It is time to stop objectifying, denying, and distancing ourselves from the reality of life force all around us.

I could have begun this month of worship with a ministry theme of Earth from an intellectual place, reciting facts, statistics, and scientific predictions, all of which are overwhelming and easily lead to dismay or denial as a way of coping with their enormity. I might have entered more gently and offered a list of dos and don’ts to help us respond to the climate emergency. Those things matter. The predictions are valid and sound. Everything we do, small and large, matters. We ought to be knowledgeable and change what we can in ourselves, our community, and the world.

However, I am not a scientist or an ecological expert. I am a mother, a theologian, and a minister. I am called to remind you that all the knowledge in the world will not change our ways if our hearts do not also change. In fact, a changed heart, be it broken, opened, or both, is the most assured way to engagement and change.

Our world is alive, friends. She is crying for us to be in relationship with her. The best way to do this is to be and feel our connection to the Earth in our hearts and bodies. This means we feel her pain, are blessed by her gifts, and are awed by her beauty.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr encourages all of us to spend time genuinely communing with a single part of nature. This might mean that we get down on our knees and be with a blade of grass. We see the dew twinkle in the early morning light and watch the chlorophyll rebound in green vibrancy when it rains. We laugh at how the grass lies flat under the weight of our crawling grandchild and bounces back as they crawl to the

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next spot.

Robin Kimmerer encourages us to realize how the English language has been used to distance us from the animacy of creation. "Linguistic imperialism has always been a tool of colonization ...which renders the beloved land as lifeless object, the forest as board feet of timber," she writes.<sup>1</sup> "In English, you're either a human or a thing."<sup>2</sup> Whereas in Potawatomi, Kimmerer's language of origin, the world is divided into animate and inanimate rather than male and female. They speak differently of everything that is alive.

She invites us to connect with life beyond humans using pronouns rather than "it" when referring to animals and parts of nature. "It" objectifies and distances us from the living around us.

Kimmerer imagines using the pronoun "ki," which in the plural form is "kin." Thus, a beautiful blue heron taking off from the marsh is not an "it"; it is instead a ki. And the seals in the ocean are kin, rather than objects separate from our fate. Doing this, we can begin to live and relate to the world around us as though it were "a democracy of species, not a tyranny of one," to use Kimmerer's phrase.<sup>3</sup>

When we live in relationship with the living Earth and her creatures, we are not alone. We are kin. We feel gratitude for her many gifts. We feel compassion for the pains being inflicted on life around us. We feel grief and anger, and we are called to do what we can to love and protect the living web of which we are a part, because it breaks our heart not to. That's where I need us to reside – in our hearts and our bodies, relating to creation in love and gratitude.

When Robin Kimmerer began to write about the Thanksgiving Address, which we shared together this morning, she was concerned about appropriation. After all, she is a member of the Potawatomi Nation, not the Haudenosaunce or Iroquois Confederacy, who created the beautiful

1 <https://orionmagazine.org/artilce/speaking-of-nature/>

2 Robin Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy," *The Leopold Outlook*, Winter 2012.

3 Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy."

words. She approached Oren Lyons, an Onondaga Faithkeeper about this. His reply is haunting. He said, "Of course you should share it. We've been waiting five hundred years for people to listen. If they'd understood the Thanksgiving then, we wouldn't be in this mess."

She goes on to invite us as the readers to imagine what it would be like to have our school children recite the Thanksgiving Address instead of the Pledge of Allegiance. With no mal intent to veterans who have served our country, she writes how her hopes extend beyond traditional white people's views of the Republic.

*The boundaries of what I honor are bigger than the republic...*

*Let us pledge reciprocity with the living world...*

*If what we want for our people is patriotism, then let us inspire true love of country by invoking the land herself...*

*If we want to raise good leaders, let us remind our children of the eagle and the maple...*

*If what we aspire to is justice for all, then let it be justice for all of Creation.*

And so may we enter our month-long journey into a ministry theme of Earth. May this be but the beginning of a lifelong journey toward wholeness.

Amen and blessed be.