



**MERCY  
GLOBAL  
PRESENCE**

# Introduction: Presence to Earth

**Elizabeth Davis rsm (Newfoundland)**

In September 2020, we began the third Segment of Mercy Global Presence, centering our hearts and minds on “presence of, to and with God.” We heard in the Introduction, “Together we rejoice in the God who creates and cares, in the God who dwells among us, in the God who calls us into relationship, in the God who is with us, in the God who suffers with us, in the God who is love, in the God who walks with us now and forever.” Mary-Paula Cancienne rsm gave us a profound reflection, “Opening to the grace of presence involves three stages: vulnerability, revelation, and resiliency.” In an inviting painting, Marilyn Browne rsm used “a spiral to represent God in this painting, to echo the spirals used by some of the first peoples of the world - the Maoris, the Indigenous peoples of Australia and some Native American tribes - to represent the Divine in their art.” Maura Walsh rsm reminded us about “growing up in Ireland in an environment of Celtic Spirituality, in which God was not removed from the world and the lives of human beings, was hallowed. God was all around – in the landscape of sea and mountain, bog and forest, in the rising and setting sun, in the comings and goings of the seasons.”

Amanda Carrier rsm gave us hope in the midst of the pandemic, “Covid-19 highlighted systemic injustices, inequality, and marginalization but is also drew us, individually and collectively, into the presence of God.” Agnes Hunter rsm gave visible depth to this same thought from Kenya, ““Every year, the Maasai Mara, known for its large population of lions, leopards, cheetahs, elephants and millions of herbivores, host over 300,000 domestic and international tourists. No single tourist has visited the Mara in more than 60 days. Therefore, the animals are at peace.” Josephine Davies rsm and Cathy Edge rsm shared with us a beautiful prayer reflection which began with these words, “Awareness of the presence of God fills Julian of Norwich with joy, desire, hope and love. Lord, we pray that, seeking wisdom from her we may make your presence in our daily lives more conscious and vibrant.”

Enlivened and awed by the depths of this first month’s reflection, we move to the second theme within “Presence,” presence to Earth. Once again, diverse voices of theologian, artist, distinct voice, scientist, minister, global thinker, and prayer maker will challenge our thinking, move our hearts, strengthen our spirits and bring us into new awareness of our own presence to Earth and the profound impact that has on who and how we are.

## **Reflections through Scripture – Creation**

Four themes flow through the Scriptures as we reflect on presence to Earth: creation, covenant, care for Earth and God’s steadfast love, and Earth’s response. The very first chapters of Genesis give us two creation stories, very different in their approach, but both focused on God’s intentional creation of Earth. In Genesis 1, God creates with a word, “Let the Earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on Earth that bear fruit with the seed in it. . . Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the Earth across the dome of the sky. . . Let the Earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things

and wild animals of the Earth of every kind. . . Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:11, 20, 26, 31). In the second creation story, the Lord God needs someone to till the soil of Earth, “The Lord God made the Earth and the heavens. . .The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there the Lord God put the man whom the Lord God had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:4, 8-9).

The psalms go on to give us many other stories of creation, all different yet all showing the love to God for Earth. One example is Ps 65:5-9, in which we read, “O God, you are the hope of all the ends of Earth and of the farthest seas. By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. Those who live at Earth’s farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy. You visit the Earth and water it, you greatly enrich it.”

### **Reflections through Scripture – Covenant**

The very first time the word “covenant” is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible is in Genesis 9 when God establishes a covenant between God and Earth. God said, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the Earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. . . This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth. When I bring clouds over the Earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh” (Gen 9:8-15).

Leonardo Boff, in his *Cry of Earth, Cry of the Poor*, gives us a profound reflection of presence to Earth mirrored in this covenant, “Human beings must feel that they are sons and daughters of the rainbow, those who translate this divine covenant with all the beings existing and living, with new relationships of kindness, compassion, cosmic solidarity, and deep reverence for the mystery that each one bears and reveals. Only then will there be integral liberation, of the human being and of Earth, and rather than the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth there will be common celebration of the redeemed and the freed, human beings in our own house, on our good, great, and bountiful Mother Earth.”

### **Reflections through Scripture – Care and Steadfast Love for Earth**

God loves Earth. We read in Deuteronomy (11:11-12), “But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, a land that the Lord your God looks after. The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.” Over and over again, we are told of God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) for Earth. The beautiful psalm of steadfast love, Psalm 136, begins with a beautiful section on creation of Earth:

O give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is good,  
for God's steadfast love endures for ever.  
who by understanding made the heavens,  
for God's steadfast love endures for ever;  
who spread out Earth on the waters,  
for God's steadfast love endures for ever;  
who made the great lights,  
for God's steadfast love endures for ever;  
the sun to rule over the day,  
for God's steadfast love endures for ever;  
the moon and stars to rule over the night,  
for God's steadfast love endures for ever.  
Ps 136:1, 5-9

### **Reflections through Scripture – Earth's Response**

The psalms echo with Earth's response in joy and praise. We sing in Psalm 96 1, 11-13):

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all Earth.  
Let the heavens be glad, and let Earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
let the field exult, and everything in it.  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord;  
for the Lord is coming, is coming to judge Earth.

And, again, we hear in the third last psalm in the Book of Psalms, Ps 148:7-10:

Praise the Lord from Earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,  
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling the Lord's command!  
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!  
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

### **Indigenous Peoples ~ Presence to Earth**

While Indigenous peoples are diverse in their lifestyles, in their cultures and in their spiritualities, they all hold in common their interconnectedness with Earth. We will briefly reflect on examples from countries where Sisters of Mercy live and minister.

The Indigenous leader, Luther Standing Bear, from the United States, in the 1930s wrote, "The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power. It was good for the skin to touch the Earth and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred Earth. . . . The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing."

The Assembly of First Nations in Canada gives us insight into their spirituality in this statement entitled *Honouring Earth*: "From the realms of the human world, the sky dwellers, the water beings, forest creatures and all other forms of life, the beautiful

Mother Earth gives birth to, nurtures and sustains all life. Mother Earth provides us with our food and clean water sources. She bestows us with materials for our homes, clothes, and tools. She provides all life with raw materials for our industry, ingenuity, and progress. She is the basis of who we are as “real human beings” that include our languages, our cultures, our knowledge, and wisdom to know how to conduct ourselves in a good way. If we listen from the place of connection to the Spirit That Lives in All Things, Mother Earth teaches what we need to know to take care of her and all her children. All are provided by our mother, the Earth. Indigenous peoples are caretakers of Mother Earth and realize and respect her gifts of water, air, and fire. First Nations peoples have a special relationship with the Earth and all living things in it. This relationship is based on a profound spiritual connection to Mother Earth that guided Indigenous peoples to practice reverence, humility, and reciprocity.

For the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the Torres Straits, the connection with Earth echoes the North American peoples. “Indigenous spirituality derives from a philosophy that establishes the wholistic notion of the interconnectedness of the elements of the Earth and the universe, animate and inanimate, whereby people, the plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people say they have a spiritual connection to the land, sea, landforms, watercourses, the species and plant life, this connection exists through the Law developed at the time of creation. Thus, each person or specific plant or place is linked to the spirit of its creation and thus to each other, which is a relationship of “mutual spirit being.”

One of their gifts in exploring this relationship is *Dadirri*. One of their elders, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, explains it in this way, “*Dadirri* is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. *Dadirri* recognizes the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call ‘contemplation.’ When I experience *dadirri*, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of *dadirri* is listening.”

The Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, the Maori, have achieved something no other group has yet achieved. The New Zealand courts first accepted their plea concerning river diversions: “One needs to understand the culture of the Whanganui River iwi [tribe] to realize how deeply ingrained the saying *ko au te awa, ko te awa, ko au* [I am the river, the river is me] is to those who have connections to the river. . . Their spirituality is their “connectedness” to the river. To take away part of the river . . . is to take away part of the iwi. To desecrate the water is to desecrate the iwi. To pollute the water is to pollute the people.”

The courts then, the first in the world, granted legal personhood to the Whanganui River which it deemed to be a living entity. The legislation refers to the river as an “indivisible, living whole,” conferring it “all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities” of an individual. Based on the Whanganui precedent, 820 square miles of forests, lakes, and rivers—a former national park known as Te Urewera—also gained legal personhood. Soon a mountain, Taranaki, will become the third such person.

## Presence to Earth – Recent Voices

Francis of Assisi was among the first European persons to see Earth and its creatures as living entities in connection with human beings. His *Canticle of Creatures* contains the verse, “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.” In the twentieth century, Dag Hammarskjöld, the second secretary-general (1953–61) of the United Nations, wrote words which echo those of Francis, “So rests the sky against the Earth. The dark still tarn in the lap of the forest. As a husband embraces his wife's body in faithful tenderness, so the bare ground and trees are embraced by the still, high, light of the morning. I feel an ache of longing to share in this embrace, to be united and absorbed. A longing like carnal desire, but directed towards Earth, water, sky, and returned by the whispers of the trees, the fragrance of the soil, the caresses of the wind, the embrace of water and light. Content? No, no, no - but refreshed, rested - while waiting.”

A pioneer environmentalist, Rachel Carson, wrote the now classic book, *Silent Spring*, initiating a new approach to our presence to Earth in this new age. Her words began a global movement which continues into our time, “To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and flow of the tides, to feel the breath of a mist moving over a great salt marsh, to watch the flight of shore birds that have swept up and down the surf lines of the continents for untold thousands of years, to see the running of the old eels and the young shad to the sea, is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any Earthly life can be. . . Those who contemplate the beauty of Earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.”

In 2000, most of the countries of the United Nations signed The Earth Charter, a document with sixteen principles powering a global movement towards a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Its preamble gives a sense of its fundamental approach: “We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.”

Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople and the Eastern Orthodox Church has been the leader in bringing churches into the global environmental movement. He says, “For human beings . . . to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins.”

With his encyclical *Laudato Si* in 2015', Pope Francis has led the Roman Catholic Church into a new theological and spiritual understanding of our connectedness with Earth. In that encyclical we read, “Earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (*Rom* 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the Earth (cf. *Gen* 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air, and we receive life and



refreshment from her waters” (LS, #2). And again, “A sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our Earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey” (LS, #34).

The encyclical goes on to say, “These situations have caused sister Earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years. Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what God desired when God created it and correspond with God’s plan for peace, beauty, and fullness” (LS, #53). Pope Francis summarizes the key theme near the end of the encyclical, “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of God’s creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother Earth” (LS, #92).

In 2019, Pope Francis advanced the theological thinking by calling the Synod on the Amazon. The final document from the Synod, *New Paths For The Church And For An Integral Ecology*, gives us new insights into our presence to Earth: “#2 The Amazon rainforest is a “biological heart” for the increasingly threatened Earth. . . #17 Listening to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor and of the peoples of the Amazon with whom we walk, calls us to a true integral conversion. . . #66 God has given us the Earth as a gift and as a task, to care for it and to answer for it; we do not own it. . . #101 The ancestral wisdom of the aboriginal peoples affirms that mother Earth has a feminine face.”

We conclude our reflections on presence to Earth with this prayer from the Navajo people in the United States. It is entitled *Walk In Beauty*:

Today I will walk out, today everything negative will leave me  
I will be as I was before, I will have a cool breeze over my body.  
I will have a light body, I will be happy forever, nothing will hinder me.  
I walk with beauty before me. I walk with beauty behind me.  
I walk with beauty below me. I walk with beauty above me.  
I walk with beauty around me. My words will be beautiful.  
In beauty all day long may I walk.  
Through the returning seasons, may I walk.  
On the trail marked with pollen may I walk.  
With dew about my feet, may I walk.  
With beauty before me may I walk.  
With beauty behind me may I walk.  
With beauty below me may I walk.  
With beauty above me may I walk.  
With beauty all around me may I walk.  
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk.  
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk.  
My words will be beautiful. . .