

Embodying Our Faith

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26; Psalm 19

Hymns: VT 386 – One Is the Body, VT 813 – Heart with Loving Heart United

1 Corinthians 12:12-26 (NRSV):

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Psalm 19:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;

the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;

⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
¹² But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.
¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

One of my evening calming strategies for a number of months this past year has been to watch a biblical archaeology show in the evening. Led by an Israeli-Canadian journalist, I have felt like I have travelled around the Holy Land a little bit (something I've never had the chance to do in real life). I was amazed by just how many very ancient artifacts and buildings he explored and showed. There are layers and layers of history under every house and building in Israel-Palestine. You can't throw a rock without hitting something that's thousands of years old – sometimes, literally! One of the stories told on the show is of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls:

In 1947 an Arab shepherd boy was looking for a lost goat in caves in the Judean desert on the west side of the Dead Sea when he chanced upon some of the first Dead Sea Scrolls (often called the Qumran scrolls). He was throwing rocks into the caves to see if the goat was there, and instead he heard the breaking of pottery. The sound frightened him and he ran away, but later he returned to

examine the caves and found the broken pots containing manuscripts. The discovery of several other ancient manuscripts from Qumran shook the scholarly world: one was the Isaiah Scroll and another the Habakkuk Commentary. The scholars at the American School of Oriental Research realized immediately that



these scrolls were older than any Old Testament manuscripts to date. At least eleven caves in the vicinity of Qumran held manuscripts of all the biblical books except Esther and Nehemiah. The dates of these manuscripts range from about 250 BC to AD 50.¹

(Here you see the Scroll of Isaiah from Qumran). Imagine throwing a

stone and hitting an artefact that's over 2,000 years old! Amazing.

As I watched this show, full of similar stories, I wondered why I was so unfamiliar with much of this archaeology, despite having studied the Bible for so long. Why had I never thought about the exact spot where Jesus was born (now in the basement of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, West Bank) or exactly which mountain could have been Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments? Perhaps my faith is somewhat disembodied, and disconnected from the land of its origins, the real, physical landscapes, artefacts, and ruins that gave birth to these beliefs.

Many of us take for granted a kind of division or binary between body and spirit that was really foreign to the faith of the ancient Israelites, who were very tied to place and the land, whose faith had a pronounced earthiness to it. Even discussions of God in the Hebrew Scriptures have a sense of God as embodied – God “walks” in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2 & 3), Moses encounters God on Mount Sinai as fire and smoke

¹ Image of the Isaiah scroll and story found here: <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-fulldisplay.pl?SID=20220118715145945&code=ACT&RC=54196&Row=3>

(Exodus 24), God “passes by” Elijah (I Kings 19), and so on. It was only in the time of Jesus that some shifts were beginning to happen, in part because of the strong Greek/Hellenistic influence. The Jewish faith was shifting from worship being centred in the Temple in Jerusalem, with God in some way most present in one place (the Holy of Holies in the centre of the Temple complex, accessible only to the high priests) to a synagogue system, where each community could have its own place of worship, with God presumably present in each of these synagogues. So God was essentially having a change of address – from living in one place, the Temple in Jerusalem only – to being accessible and present in these many synagogues. And we see this in the Gospels, where Jesus makes pilgrimages to the Temple for some religious festivals, but also preaches in some of the local village synagogues. He’s living in this in-between time in Jewish theology when God is not as limited to one place as before (which comes in handy when that Temple is destroyed a few decades later).²

Now why am I telling you about all of this? Well, as I preach this sermon to an empty sanctuary, with only those of us involved in worship here, we’re experiencing a major shift ourselves, to worshipping from home exclusively for the next few weeks. We are used to coming together as a community for worship, and to have a pause in that is really difficult. There’s no way around it. It’s hard. Virtual worship is not the same as physically gathering in this beloved space with beloved people, never mind shaking hands, exchanging hugs, and feeding each other with potlucks like we used to! And yet we do this out of love for one another – out of a sense of wanting to care for each other’s health, to keep one another safe, body and spirit, and be responsible in doing

² Some of this was inspired by the podcast, Interview with Benjamin D. Sommer, “Does God Have a Body?” *The Bible for Normal People*, <https://peteenns.com/interview-with-benjamin-d-sommer-does-god-have-a-body/>

our part for our wider community, too, as we all make our way through these pandemic waves. We can do this hard thing out of this great love, knowing that God is not limited to one place, but goes with each of us and connects us across the distance.

Our Scripture passages for today speak into these questions of where God can be found, and God's relationship to us, body and spirit, beginning with the very famous passage from 1 Corinthians 12 about the church as the Body of Christ. So Jesus is the head of this body, and we are the many members of it, as diverse and united as the many parts of a body are. Now the word "church" here means something very different than what we think of. This was not a well-organized or in any way established institution with lavish buildings and centralized cathedrals. These were scattered house-churches here and there, itinerant preachers like Paul telling people the Jesus stories, people dodging persecution or enduring imprisonment by religious and political authorities who found them and their message threatening. That was the early church. That is what Paul is calling the Body of Christ: this rag-tag, struggling but scrappy group that's scattered all over. So, even scattered, Christ is in the people, knitting them together into one Body.

And for Paul, being the Body of Christ means something very specific, and it has to do with belonging to one another precisely in our differences. So he writes,

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as [God] chose.

So this diversity among us is understood as a gift, not a problem.

But this is also not a flat diversity – not everyone is to be treated exactly the same. Instead, the church as the Body of Christ is to reflect the upside-down kingdom/kin-dom values of Jesus, where the last shall be first. Paul continues,

the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect;²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member,²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

This speaks of a Body that works at lifting up those who need it, whether that's little children or those struggling with physical or mental health or aging or loneliness. This is a body that's deeply connected, in solidarity with one another, weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. I invite us to do likewise over these next few weeks – can we make sure to reach out to each other as needed, to remain connected across the distance with one another? In doing so, we live into our identity as the Body of Christ, whether gathered or scattered. Christ is embodied in us.

Our second Scripture passage for today takes this even further, speaking of God's relationship with creation in very embodied ways. Psalm 19 begins with very vivid imagery about God's presence all around us:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims [God's] handiwork.

² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

This voiceless voice proclaims and tells us that God is our Creator, that God's presence is available to us day and night, embodied in us and in all the earth. The psalm ends with God being declared "our rock and our redeemer," bringing God's very presence into the rocks and stones, the mountains and earth itself.

Passages like these lead theologian Sallie McFague to speak of the earth as God's Body. She writes, "Our model helps us to keep theology earthly; it helps is to avoid abstraction, generalization, and spiritualization." To love God, neighbour, and creation, is deeply embodied, for McFague: "an incarnational theology always insists that both sin and salvation are ... fleshly, concrete, particular matters... *in relation* to the forms of God's presence we encounter in our daily, ordinary lives: other bodies," including "the universe (world) as God's body."³ This adds a different twist on the words from Psalm 139 that Patrick reflected on last week: that there is nowhere we can go where God is not. If the whole earth, the whole universe is the body of God, filled with God's presence, then we are never far from God at all. We live and move and have our being in this God who is embodied in God's whole creation. And those are words of great comfort in times like these.

Let's close in prayer:

God of wind and flame,
Of oceans and mountains,
Pillars of cloud and fire by night,
We thank you for your constant presence
As near to us as our breath.

In these days of challenge and worry,
Calm our bodies and our spirits
With your peace which surpasses our understanding.
Give us patience as we wait for another wave of this pandemic to end.
Give us compassion for ourselves and others.

³ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993), 114.

Help us to be your hands and feet to one another in this time,
To be the Body of Christ even across the distance.

Remind us, O Creator of the universe,
That there is nowhere we can go where you are not,
That the heavens themselves proclaim your goodness,
And that you embrace us with your love and blessing
Today and always, Amen.