

## **Inherit the Land: The Art of Abiding in an Age of Upheaval**

#4 in the "Practical Impractical Sermon Series" Psalm 37

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This summer I started a series of sermons which Paul Hunt and I have decided to call my "Practical Impractical Sermons": being a Christian is rarely truly practical, in the way the world means that term, you know; being a Christian is about being relentlessly and ridiculously counter-cultural. Nonetheless, it appears you all appreciate this perspective, because many of you have asked me to continue this series, and so I will from time to time! This is #4 in the Series. We've talked about maintaining our spiritual focus in a materialistic world, spiritual healing, staying the course, and now, this sermon is about the art of abiding in an age of upheaval. It's about living on the land, cherishing our piece of earth, fully inhabiting the pasture that God has blessed us with.

Psalm 37 talks about how, if we set our sights on the Lord, we will learn to appreciate where we find ourselves, what the wonderful old Shaker hymn calls, "the place that is right." Psalm 37 assures us that, if we can only come to love and care for the land on which we live, we will "inherit the land." This phrase is repeated at least five times in the Psalm. We already live in a particular place, so what does it mean to "inherit" the land? I believe that God is equating right worship with right reverence for the world, with care for His creatures, with knowledge of the

land that we dwell on, with a willingness to discern the sacredness of space. Once we master this art, we will possess fully all the bounty of nature that God has prepared for us.

But how may we “inherit the land” in an age of upheaval, an era of foreclosures, a time of dire budget cuts, a decade in which, as one frightening editorial in the *New York Times* put it recently, “the lights are going out all over America” because we can no longer afford to live as we did formerly?

I’d like to suggest that the first thing to be done is to delight in the place we are given. Take a fresh look at your home. The French philosopher Pascal said that all man’s sadness and distress was the result of not being able to stay indoors by his own hearth. Today, when you go home, look lovingly at your house. It is your abode and habitation, the site of all blessings that have and will come in terms of family, safe living, and comfort in your daily life. Appreciate it. Don’t long for something else. Love it like a friend. It will become your familiar, it will have a face. And that face might just look something like Jesus.

My home has a name. I affectionately refer to our house and Henry the Horse’s paddocks as “Catharine’s Cloister.” Here I may withdraw for a time from the world and its frenzy. Here I pray every morning before my icon of Jesus and the Blessed Mother, and I burn incense and place a little vase of wildflowers from the pasture to honor My Lord. The humming bird skims

past the window and the swallows swoop like sudden Grace from the eaves of the barn. Here Randy joins me at night after work, and we share homemade bread, and peach pies, and smoky wine and lighthearted beer. Here our children, and my parents, return some times, and they all call it “home”. My young Maine Coon Cat died recently, very suddenly and unexpectedly, yet in this place his still kittenish spirit will ever continue to stalk mice in the wetlands, to streak playfully just past the corner of my eye. Here I hope someday to be buried, to become new compost to nurture the pasture’s soil. What could be a better place? Home is hallowed ground.

There is an old tradition in Anglicanism that helps us learn how to appreciate our place. It’s called “beating the bounds.” On Rogation Day, a festival day of thanksgiving and planting, the priest would walk the circumference—the physical boundary -- of the parish, as though, by his steps, he were defining, enclosing, encompassing and protecting that sacred space composed of church, parish homes and parishioners. Through his feet, he came to truly know his place. This ritual action is a holy one. As we walk in our house, around our gardens, along the paths that wind through the woods or meadows, we, too, are beating the bounds, enveloping what is best known to us, claiming it, making what the poet Wordsworth called “a local habitation and name.”

In an age of upheaval, the art of abiding—of staying put, seeing with eyes of love, “dwelling in the land and cultivating faithfulness” is the way to “delight [ourselves] in the Lord.”

This from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*:

“Love every leaf. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything.

If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things.

Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day.

And you will come at last to love the whole world with an abiding universal love.”

May it be so. Amen.